Natural Resources and Environment (NRE) Mission Area
Strategic Plan .....

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Introduction

The Natural Resources and Environment Mission Area, composed of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Forest Service (FS), is responsible for providing sensible management of our natural resources. We accomplish this by: 1) developing new technological tools that promote agricultural production while maintaining a quality environment and strong natural resource base; and 2) promoting sustainable management of private and public lands while protecting and restoring critical forestland, rangeland, wilderness and aquatic ecosystems. Shared agency outcomes include a healthy natural environment; sustainable production of food, fiber, products and services for people; vital communities; and effective and efficient service to customers.

NRE is committed to quality customer service, a productive and diverse workforce, and continually improving processes, resource and financial information and technology, and accountability to our stakeholders and the American public.

The FS and NRCS are working together on technology development and transfer, providing assistance to individuals and communities, data collection and assessment, international assistance, and developing partnerships to achieve a healthy and productive environment.

The following strategic plans by NRCS and the FS present the goals, objectives and activities of the Natural Resources and Environment Mission Area which reflect our commitment to the American people and to a sustainable natural resource base.

NRE

Forest Service (FS)
Strategic Plan

FS

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Introduction

The Forest Service was created to manage public forests and rangelands in 1905. In response to new information and a greater understanding of ecological systems and social demands, the agency has evolved. The agency's mission remains clear: Working with people to sustain the health, productivity and diversity of the land for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

Legislative Mandates

The agency's tradition of land management began with the Organic Act of 1897. The environmental legislation of the last 30 years characterizes the changing role of the agency. Recent legislation reflects the agency's renewed commitment to managing healthy ecosystems and creates more avenues for public participation in agency decision making. Other legislation has strengthened the Forest Service's ability to provide technical, financial, and economic assistance to State and private land owners and other countries. The agency's legal mandate, mission and strategic goals are primarily derived from these laws and statutes:

- *Organic Act of 1897*: Specified the purposes (i.e., timber and water supply) for which forest reserves can be established and provided for their protection and management.
- *Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act of 1960 (MUSY)*: directed that the National Forests be managed for multiple uses including recreation, range, timber, watershed and wildlife and fish and a sustained yield of products and services.
- *Clean Water Amendments Act of 1972*: establishes a policy to restore and maintain the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the Nation's waters.
- *Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA)*: sets the policy for conserving species and the critical habitat of fish, wildlife and plants that are in danger of or threatened with extinction.
- *National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA)*: provides guidelines for planning and management on National Forests and specifies information and analytical requirements for specific resources.
- *Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1978, as amended*: authorizes cooperation and assistance to non-Federal forest landowners in forest management, timber production, insect and disease control and fire prevention.
- *Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Research Act of 1978*: authorizes the agency to conduct and cooperate in research to generate knowledge about protecting, managing, and using forested, rangeland renewable resources.
- *International Forestry Cooperation Act of 1990*: authorizes the agency to work overseas and to provide technical and financial assistance for its international cooperative activities and research.

Natural Resource Assessment

The Forest and Rangelands Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (RPA) requires an assessment of the Nation's natural resources every 10 years, with a 5-year update. The latest assessment, updated in 1993, contains projections of resource use over the next several decades and identifies resource situations that are potentially acceptable, deteriorating or serious.

Potentially Acceptable Resource Conditions are those where existing conditions and projected levels of use can be sustained with current and expected future levels of management.

- Big-game habitats and populations are generally in good condition. These populations are expected to sustain hunter demand and contribute to wildlife viewing opportunities.

- Water quality of streams draining forests and grasslands is generally good, but revegetation, reclamation and other improvement efforts are needed to restore aquatic habitat.
- Range forage is generally available and demands for wildlife and livestock can be met.
- Timber volume offered for sale from National Forests is projected to remain stable at 0.9 billion cubic feet per year through 2000 and then to increase to 1.1 billion cubic feet by 2040.

Potentially Deteriorating Resource Conditions occur when projected future management and technology are not expected to keep pace with demands for resource uses, and/or resource conditions will deteriorate in the future.

- Forest health is a growing concern. From 1986 to 1991, tree mortality increased 24 percent. Many forests are stagnating due to fire exclusion. As a result, they are more susceptible to insects, diseases, and unnaturally large stand destroying fires.
- Loss of biological diversity is likely to continue. As land use intensifies, natural diversity is reduced and ecosystems are simplified. Biological communities may lose productivity, resiliency and their ability to adapt to change.
- While general rangeland health has improved over the past century, some areas are still a concern: increases in noxious weed infestations, soil erosion, and decreases in nutrient cycling rates.
- In arid and semiarid regions, increasing demands for water will lead to water rights conflicts.
- Non-point source pollution from road and trail construction, grazing, logging, and some dispersed recreation is having greater impacts on National Forest System (NFS) lands.
- Changes in water quantity and quality are impacting many aquatic species and habitat.
- As the Nation's population becomes more urban, diverse and older, recreation demands will change. New services and opportunities may be needed to provide customers with a quality experience.

Potentially Serious Resource Situations are those requiring immediate attention because they present serious problems or because there is no known management strategy or technology for dealing with them.

- Unreclaimed, abandoned and inactive mines pose dangers to the terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, especially as acid mine discharges permeate soil and water resources.
- The number of plant and animal species categorized as threatened or endangered continues to grow.
- Global climate change may affect ecological and economic systems due to shifts in vegetation and productivity. Land use changes that lead to increases in atmospheric pollutants, such as ozone and nitrous oxides, can affect ecosystem productivity and resiliency.

Partnerships and Coordination

Achieving healthy and diverse aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems concurrent with meeting the diverse needs of the American public cannot be done in a vacuum or along jurisdictional boundaries. With the ecosystem approach to management, future resource decisions will be more community-based, collaboratively designed, and

regional in scope. Coordination has taken place with other Federal research, land management and regulatory agencies (such as USDA's Agricultural Research Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service, Geological Survey, Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and Minerals Management Service, Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Electric Regulatory Commission and the National Marine Fisheries Service), and will continue. State, local and Tribal governments, private land owners, and environmental and industry groups are also key partners in providing information and resources and seeking common ground.

Key External Factors

Certain assumptions guided the agency in establishing realistic goals: the discretionary budget will be flat; the agency will have to redirect funds to implement its goals; and other financial resources will be leveraged from partners, fees and cost savings. Similarly, factors beyond the control of the agency could affect our ability to achieve goals and objectives.

- Natural disasters including floods, droughts and volcanic activity have altered fire patterns, water quality and vegetation growth. Unanticipated needs that result from natural disasters change restoration priorities and may make it difficult to meet certain objectives.
- Global climate change may alter the severity and frequency of natural disasters, along with modifying vegetation processes, habitat ranges and other ecosystem functions.
- Changes in Congressional funding and priorities affect the agency's ability to meet these goals.
- Declining budgets have also forced the agency to downsize which affects the skills mix and composition of the workforce.
- New or amended legislation often directs the agency to modify its workload and management practices and increase responsibilities and financial commitments.
- Changes in the supply and demand for timber, oil and other commodities place pressures on those resources on NFS lands. Similarly, international trade and treaties such as the North American Free Trade Agreement affect domestic supply and demand for these products and their substitutes.
- A growing economy will impact NFS lands in varying ways. For instance, increased expendable incomes mean more summer travel and vacations. This translates into increased recreation use on Forest Service and other lands. A poor economy can decrease the amount of dollars that can be leveraged from alternative sources.
- Management decisions made by State governments, individual landowners, and other Federal agencies affect resource conditions and activities on adjacent NFS lands. In most cases, the States control water quality issues and water rights adjudications, so the agency primarily reacts to State initiatives and cases.

Mission

To sustain the health, productivity and diversity of the land to meet the needs of present and future generations.

The phrase "Caring for the Land and Serving People" expresses the spirit of this mission. Implicit in this statement is the agency's collaboration with partners as stewards of the Nation's forests and rangelands.

As the lead Federal agency in natural resources conservation, the Forest Service provides leadership in the protection, management, and use of the Nation's forest, rangeland and aquatic ecosystems. Our ecosystem approach to management integrates

ecological, economic and social factors to maintain and enhance the quality of the environment to meet current and future needs. Through implementation of land and resource management plans, the agency will ensure sustainable ecosystems and provide recreation, water, timber minerals, fish, wildlife, wilderness, and aesthetic values for current and future generations on NFS lands.

Through technical and financial assistance, the Forest Service will assist States and private landowners to practice good stewardship, promote rural economic development, and improve the natural environment of cities and communities. The agency will continue to develop and use the best available scientific information to facilitate achievement of our goals and objectives. Domestically and internationally, activities will be directed at developing values, products and services in such a way as to maintain ecosystem health.

Goals

The Forest Service mission, strategic goals and objectives are derived from the laws defining and regulating agency activities. The goals and objectives describe tangible progress towards achieving the agency's mission through implementing land and resource management plans. These plans provide guidance for on-the-ground natural resource management in pursuing the strategic goals of ensuring sustainable ecosystems and providing multiple benefits.

Many of the outcome measures associated with particular objectives are still under development. The Forest Service is committed to integrating internationally recognized measures of sustainable forest management into appropriate agency goals and objectives. Until these outcome measures are more fully developed and evaluated for use by the agency, progress towards achieving our goals and objectives will be measured using existing outcome or output indicators. The Forest Service is committed to achieving the following goals.

Goal 1

Ensure Sustainable Ecosystems

This goal focuses on achieving ecosystem health and sustainability through conserving and restoring ecosystem structure, composition and processes, or ecological integrity. A guiding principle is that all forest lands, including public and private, contribute to ecological integrity. Protection, restoration and maintenance of ecological integrity can only be accomplished through cooperation and collaboration among all stakeholders, monitoring efforts across all ownerships and management boundaries, and recognizing that certain ecosystems may not meet standards of ecological integrity. Legislation, including the Organic Act, NFMA, NEPA, Clean Water Act, Public Rangelands Improvement Act, and Endangered Species Act has established a framework for ensuring the sustainability of ecosystems. Public involvement in planning and implementing priority actions as required by NEPA and the Environmental Justice Executive Order E.O. (see Management Initiatives) is vital to implementing this goal.

The majority of NFS lands are in good condition. However, RPA assessments indicate that certain situations threaten ecosystem health. Examples include the buildup and spread of weeds and insects that impair forest and rangeland conditions; soil and water quality and quantity issues that impair terrestrial and aquatic habitat; and the contamination of terrestrial and aquatic resources from unreclaimed mine sites. Restoring these resources to support healthy, diverse and resilient terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems is a primary objective for this goal.

Achieving ecosystem health can include both active and passive management measures. Ecosystem protection and restoration are priorities in all Forest Service activities and can include restricting access, revegetating disturbed areas, mitigating the spread of non-native weeds, insects and disease, managing the use and suppression of fire, and developing habitat conservation plans. Special care is provided for fragile or rare ecosystem components on NFS lands. Developmental and use impacts on all NFS lands are mitigated to minimize negative side-effects.

The Forest Service will identify, implement and monitor restoration priorities on national forest lands and work with other nations, States, and private land owners to encourage sound resource stewardship on other lands and waters. For example, restoring habitat for wildlife, fish and threatened and endangered species improves ecological conditions and provides social, recreational and economic benefits. Ecosystem health can be further restored by replacing forest cover. Revegetation may be used to reduce soil erosion, promote nutrient cycling, and improve habitat for wildlife. Reducing stand density and modifying forest vegetation may be used to improve overall ecosystem diversity. These efforts will improve the likelihood that diversity, sustainability and future management options are maintained.

Objective 1.1: Aquatic Ecosystems

Healthy, diverse, and resilient aquatic ecosystems restored and protected to maintain a variety of ecological conditions and benefits and conserve biological diversity.

The Forest Service will improve and protect wetland, riparian and aquatic functions and processes and associated values by restoring impaired soil and water conditions on about 5 percent of NFS lands needing such treatment, and improving about 15 percent of inland and anadromous fish habitat in unsatisfactory condition.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Conduct research on the impacts of land management on aquatic and riparian ecosystems.
- Inventory and describe current conditions on at least 50 percent of NFS wetland, riparian and aquatic ecosystems to establish baseline(s) for measuring progress.
- Describe aquatic ecosystem management objectives in all revised land and resource management plans.
- Monitor water quality and quantity on NFS lands.
- Promote management activities and practices that enhance aquatic ecosystems on non-industrial private forest (NIPF) lands.
- Mitigate off-site soil erosion and in-stream sediment transport influencing wetland and riparian areas.
- Implement watershed assessments and restoration needs associated with the President's Forest Plan for the Pacific Northwest (PNW Plan) and Columbia River Basin, which focus on habitat for salmon and bull trout.
- Obtain in-stream flow rights for streams on NFS lands.
- Work with States, Federal Electric Regulatory Commission, Federal agencies and land owners to secure water rights needed for managing aquatic resources.

- Implement recovery plans for listed aquatic species.
- Establish conservation agreements and strategies for sensitive aquatic species.
- Inventory assess and restore abandoned mines impacting aquatic resources.

Performance Measures

- Improved soil and water conditions on about 125,000 acres.
- Improved inland/anadromous fish habitat on about 8,500 stream miles and 40,000 lake acres.

Situation

Water quality and quantity are important considerations in maintaining healthy aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. Aquatic and riparian ecosystem conditions have improved during the last decade due to the adoption of best management practices and increased protection of water, air quality, and roads on private lands through State and local regulations. NFS lands provide a quality, dependable source of water. These resources have become even more important as the demand for water resources, especially in the arid West, increases. These demands place increased pressure on fish habitat and populations causing some populations of inland and anadromous stocks across the West to decline.

Recent challenges focus on water rights and uses and non-point source pollution. There is a continued demand for hydroelectric projects many of which pass through or impact NFS resources. Each year, the agency reviews hundreds of relicensing and new hydroelectric proposals that impact aquatic and fisheries resources, recreation opportunities and other values. Conflicts over managing and controlling water resources on NFS lands are increasing in magnitude and geographic extent. In-stream flows can fall below critical threshold levels affecting aquatic habitat and fish populations. Water rights must be secured to assure the sustainability of aquatic ecosystems. Non-point source pollution is impacting surface and ground water on NFS lands.

Objective 1.2: Forested Ecosystems

Ecological integrity of forested ecosystems restored or protected to maintain biological and physical components, functions and interrelationships, and the capability for self-renewal.

The Forest Service will restore 5-10 percent of NFS lands identified as needing restoration, and use a variety of treatments to maintain, improve, and restore forested lands to ensure ecological integrity.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Conduct research on the effects of land management, fires, and insects and diseases on forested ecosystems.
- Inventory and describe the current condition of the forested ecosystems of the United States to establish baseline(s) for measuring progress.
- Include management objectives for forested ecosystems in all revised land and resource management plans.

- Develop a collaborative, national strategy addressing forest health.
- Monitor effectiveness of management actions and adapt management practices to reflect knowledge gained in efforts to restore ecological integrity.
- Monitor soil, water, and air quality values on NFS lands.
- Increase coordination with Federal, State and private landowners in monitoring forest health.
- Assist non-Federal forested landowners in developing management plans that protect long-term forest health.
- Protect forest ecosystems through insect and disease prevention, suppression and eradication.
- Promote tree vigor through various management techniques.
- Reforest or reseed areas to replace vegetative cover.
- Restore terrestrial habitat for wildlife and threatened, endangered, and sensitive species (TE&S).
- Implement recovery plans and establish conservation agreements for TE&S species associated with forested lands.
- Consolidate fragmented ownership and facilitate restoration and protection.
- Modify forest vegetation to restore desired forest types or increase ecosystem diversity.

Performance Measures

- Accelerate full implementation of forest health monitoring to cover 100 percent of all forested lands.
- Complete revisions of land and resource management plans for about two-thirds of the national forests.
- Reduce hazardous fuels on about 5 million acres of NFS lands and provide technical assistance to State and private landowners.

Situation

The forested lands managed by the agency are diverse and have increasing value. These lands provide watershed stability, fish and wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, commercial forest products, and other values. Population pressures, shifting social values, renewed emphasis on long-term sustainability, and the dependency of certain species on forested habitat, have reduced the amount of timber harvested from NFS lands in the last decade. Conversely, projections for recreational use of forest lands show a significant increase in demand.

At the same time, forest health is a growing concern. In many areas of the country, there is a build up of fuelwood resulting from natural succession and high levels of mortality. Unwanted wildland fires that occur in such areas can cause long-term damage to soil productivity. Several factors contribute to these declining conditions. Historic wildfires, past management practices, and other disturbances have resulted in extensive, frequently over-aged and densely forested landscapes. Forest succession in such areas coupled with years of fire control efforts, have yielded overcrowding of forests and changes in understory composition. Forest ecosystem health concerns include invasion by exotic forest insects, diseases, weeds, reduction of biological diversity, degradation of riparian areas, and weather- related forces such as drought and air pollution. Together, these conditions have resulted in vast acreages prone and susceptible to insect and disease infestations and destructive wild fire.

The rural-urban-wildland interface is a particular concern in some localities. Expansion of home developments into or adjacent to rural and forested areas that

are becoming more flammable has also increased the probability of accidental fire and or the loss of life and property to wildfire.

Current monitoring activities help determine ecological conditions and restoration needs, and collaborative partnerships help forge strategies to promote forest health and further rural community economic vitality. Additional research and monitoring is needed, however, to determine the most effective strategies for restoring ecological integrity of the forests.

Objective 1.3: Rangeland Ecosystems

Healthy, diverse and resilient rangeland ecosystems restored and protected to maintain robust riparian systems, a variety of ecological conditions and benefits, and biodiversity.

The Forest Service will restore 5-10 percent of NFS land identified as needing work to improve rangelands to a condition supporting native and desirable non-native species as defined by land and resource management plan standards.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Inventory and describe the current condition of the rangeland ecosystems to establish a baseline(s) for measuring progress.
- Include objectives for rangeland ecosystem management in all revised land and resource management plans, including management guidelines for restoring diversity and productivity of degraded grasslands.
- Classify and monitor health of rangeland vegetation.
- Conduct research on how livestock management practices affect noxious weed control.
- Increase cooperative efforts to assess proper functioning condition of riparian and wetland ecosystems.
- Conduct range improvements to restore native species and decrease erosion.
- Restore T&E habitat on rangelands.

Performance Measures

- Complete revisions of land and resource management plans for about two-thirds of the national forests and grasslands.
- Reduce the spread, introduction and impact of weedy plant invasions through implementing the National Strategy for Invasive Plant Management and Fire 21 Policy.

Situation

Rangelands cover two-thirds of all NFS lands and include grass and shrub lands, alpine meadows, felfields, tundra and oak savannas. They provide habitat for wildlife, wild horses and burros, along with numerous other grassland species. Since the turn of the century rangeland conditions have continued to improve. Today, approximately 10 percent of rangelands within grazing allotments are in unsatisfactory condition.

Over-grazing, water shortages and interrupted fire regimes in fire-dependent ecosystems make rangelands more susceptible to wildfires and weed, insect and dis-

ease infestations. Soil loss, weedy plant invasions, and diminished biological diversity are symptoms of declining rangeland health. Restoration efforts must consider single grazing systems that often include State, other Federal, and private lands; drought and temperature extremes; fires; wildlife habitat; wild and domestic grazing of herbivores; and other factors affecting rangeland health. Limited availability of herbicide as a vegetation control mechanism may hamper restoration success.

Objective 1.4: Hazardous Substances Sites

Healthy, diverse and resilient aquatic and terrestrial resources restored and protected through hazardous substances site response.

Aquatic and terrestrial resources will be restored and protected through hazardous substances site response under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA).

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Complete inventory of hazardous substances sites.
- Secure participation of potentially responsible parties through enforceable orders.

Performance Measures

- Take response actions at 375 CERCLA sites that pose the greatest threat to public health, welfare, or environment.

Situation

Releases from hazardous substances sites can pose significant threats to public health, welfare and the environment. The Forest Service inventory of hazardous substances sites will be completed by the end of FY 1998. At this time, it is estimated that up to 1,700 mines and 120 landfills could require cleanup action under CERCLA. In addition, other sites such as illegal dumps, agency disposal sites, and Formerly Utilized Defense Sites could also require CERCLA response action. Funding for these actions comes from a variety of sources including Agriculture and Interior and Related Agencies appropriations, potentially responsible parties, and other Federal agencies, and State and local governments.

Objective 1.5: TE&S Species Recovery

Populations of threatened, endangered and sensitive species will be conserved through recovery and management efforts.

The Forest Service will work with regulatory agencies and others to conserve species listed as threatened or endangered or identified as sensitive.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Conduct research on the habitat requirements of TE&S species.
- Focus on protecting TE&S species as indicators of healthy ecosystems.
- Complete conservation strategies to protect and restore at-risk species.
- Implement ecosystem-based strategies focusing on multiple species.

Performance Measures

- Complete conservation agreements with other Federal and State agencies for 50 percent of the identified sensitive species to prevent listing.

Situation

The status of wildlife, fish and plant populations is a primary indicator of the health of forest, grass and shrub, and aquatic ecosystems. Of the 1,049 species currently listed under the Endangered Species Act as threatened or endangered, 332 have habitat on NFS lands. Habitat that is crucial to maintaining many species of plants and animals is at risk. For example, more than 50 percent of the wetland acreage across the contiguous U.S. is gone; grasslands and savannas have declined by 98 percent. Factors such as logging, road building, habitat fragmentation and long-term fire suppression have influenced TE&S species viability.

Goal 2

Provide Multiple Benefits for People within the Capabilities of Ecosystems

Within the limitations of maintaining ecosystem health and conserving biological diversity, forests and rangelands will be managed to meet people's needs for uses, values, products, and services. The legal mandates set forth in the MUSY, NFMA, the Wilderness Act, Historic Preservation Act, and Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act have directed the agency to provide for multiple benefits from NFS lands and to assist other land owners as they achieve similar goals. On NFS lands, this is accomplished through the land and resource management planning process. Public involvement, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Environmental Justice E.O. 12898 will be used to inform decision making and achieve this goal. Customer surveys will help the agency assess satisfaction.

On non-NFS lands, assistance will be offered to owners and managers to help fulfill mutual objectives in an ecologically sound manner. Domestically and internationally, activities will be directed at developing values, products and services in such a way as to maintain ecosystem health. Ensuring ecosystem sustainability requires managers to monitor and adjust the amount and kinds of uses.

Objective 2.1: Recreation

Quality recreation experiences with minimal impacts to ecosystem stability and condition.

The Forest Service will develop the capability to measure and improve the level of customer satisfaction provided by recreation opportunities (including fish and wildlife use) on NFS lands and the impact of these activities on ecosystem condition.

Investments in recreation management planning and practices will be encouraged on NIPF lands.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Conduct research on trends in recreation demand, and determine the impact of those trends on public land management.
- Promote ecologically responsible recreation use.
- Implement the Recreation Fee Demonstration Pilot.
- Encourage enhanced recreation opportunities on NIPF lands.

Performance Measures

- Develop the capability to measure and improve the level of customer satisfaction provided by recreation opportunities and facilities.
- Improve stream, lake and riparian habitat, provide better facilities and angling access, and increase aquatic education to implement the agency's Recreational Fisheries Conservation Plan.

Situation

NFS lands, facilities and programs provide more outdoor recreation than any other agency, system or organization in the Nation. Recreation activities drew over 859 million visits to national forests in 1996. This public demand is also increasing the pressure on NIPF landowners to provide related opportunities. Spending by recreationists visiting the NFS lands contributed almost $100 billion to the Nation's gross domestic product. These expenditures including fees, equipment purchased and travel expenses are important to rural communities, which provide many of these services. Revenues to the U.S. Treasury from national forest recreation and special use fees exceed $46 million annually.

Concession management is a major delivery system for outdoor recreation. About 50 percent of the total developed campground capacity is provided through private concessionaire management. More than 5,000 commercial concessionaires provide developed site recreation experiences on NFS lands. They operate ski areas, lodges and resorts, outfitter and guide services, as well as camps, and generate over $25 million to the U.S. Treasury. Ski areas, half of which are located on NFS lands, generate over $18 million in land-use fees and serve some 32 million skiers annually. Outfitter-guide operations, including big-game hunting and white water river rafting, generate $2 million in fees.

While use at developed recreation sites is increasing, the condition of NFS recreation facilities is declining. Many recreation facilities were constructed in the 1930s and 1960s. These facilities are reaching the end of their designed life and will become unusable if they are not restored or reconstructed. Reconstruction will include changes to meet current customer needs, including compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

FS

Objective 2.2: Wilderness

Healthy and diverse wilderness ecosystems that provide quality recreation experiences.

The Forest Service will ensure wilderness is affected primarily by natural processes, is protected from human-caused degradation, and offers outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined types of recreation. The agency will increase customer satisfaction from an established baseline.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Conduct research on sustaining wilderness resources in an ecologically sound manner.
- Inventory air quality values on National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) lands.
- Meet national or wilderness plan objectives.
- Conduct prescribed fire on NWPS lands.

Performance Measures

- Manage all wilderness areas to approved wilderness plan standards.
- Reconstruct approximately 1000 miles of wilderness trails to standard.

Situation

Since passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964, the NWPS has grown from about 9 million acres to 103.5 million acres. The Forest Service manages almost 400 of the 630 units in the NWPS (nearly 35 million acres), including approximately 31,000 miles of trails. Recommendations for Wilderness Areas are established as part of the land and resource management planning process. In FY 1995, a total of 13.9 million visitor-days were recorded. An area is designated as wilderness to protect and preserve the natural character, but still allow visitor opportunities for solitude or a primitive type of recreation. Management activities in wilderness areas are limited. The forces of nature—fire, insects and disease, among many other phenomenon—are allowed to play their role in wilderness without intervention, as long as they do not threaten resources and properties outside the designated Wilderness boundary. High levels of visitor use and threats such as air pollution, exotic plants and animals, insect and disease problems, mineral development and grazing are placing increased pressure on wilderness areas.

Objective 2.3: Heritage Resources

Protected and restored heritage resources that are available for the education and use of current and future generations.

The Forest Service will increase visitor satisfaction through awareness and participation in inventory, restoration, and protection from vandalism.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Research heritage resource conservation education, management, and enhancement techniques.
- Inventory NFS lands for heritage resources.

Performance Measures

- Increased participation in interpretive activities, protecting heritage resources and restoring damaged sites to improve visitor satisfaction.

Situation

The National Historic Preservation Act directs Federal agencies to administer federally owned or controlled prehistoric and historic resources for the benefit of present and future generations. NFS lands contain the evidence of more than 10,000 years of human history. Many of these resources have been destroyed or are threatened by natural causes or by artifact hunters who destroy the sites looking for artifacts. Public interest has resulted in an increased need for interpretation of heritage resources, such as "Windows On The Past" and "Passport in Time."

Native American concern over treatment of Native American remains and religious sites is also growing, and repatriation of burial and human remains under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) remains a significant issue. Heritage resources from both contemporary and ancient Native American cultures provide information on environments in the past and establish a social context for ecosystem management.

Objective 2.4: Urban Forests

Improved urban environments and enhanced community livability through healthy landscapes.

The Forest Service will increase assistance to eligible communities by 25 percent to increase local capacities to assess, expand, and improve urban environments.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Research the social and economic benefits of urban forestry.
- Increase citizen involvement in tree planting, care and protection.
- Conduct studies on pollution reduction and climate moderation in urban environments.

Performance Measures

- Provide assistance to improve the natural, economic and social environments of about 8,000 towns and cities annually.

Situation

There are 45,000 towns and cities with thousands of acres of urban and community forests. These forest resources improve the environmental and social conditions by mitigating air, water, soil and noise pollution, reducing energy use and beautifying communities. The agency plays an important role in ensuring that

these forest resources are managed sustainably and in a manner that provides environmental, social and economic values for the communities.

Objective 2.5: Rural Communities

Economically healthy and diversified rural communities operating under strategic plans for sustainable development.

The Forest Service will increase the number of assisted rural communities working under broad-based local strategic plans by 3 percent a year until reaching the goal of 50 percent of all assisted communities operating under such plans.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Research forest and rangeland use in rural development, recreation and tourism and include analysis of individual values toward natural resources and stakeholder involvement in decision making.
- Develop strategic approaches with Federal, State, and local agencies and organizations to assist rural communities in diversifying their economies and create capacity for sustainable development.

Performance Measures

- Number of assisted communities operating under local strategic plans increasing at 3 percent annually.

Situation

Rural counties comprise nearly 72 percent of all counties in the United States. Of the rural counties, nearly 70 percent are highly dependent on forested and rangeland resources, and many of these communities are home to Forest Service offices. Changes in the way public lands are being managed have brought both opportunity and hardship to rural communities. Diversified economies give rural communities the capacity to weather changes in resource demands and uses.

Objective 2.6: Forest Products

A sustainable yield of forest products that contributes to meeting the Nation's demands and to restoring, improving or maintaining the forest ecosystem health.

Within the context of maintaining and restoring healthy forests, the agency will provide a sustainable supply of forest products from NFS lands and encourage other land owners to do the same.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Develop information through forest planning, inventories and monitoring that will help establish sustainable levels of forest products within the capabilities of ecosystems.
- Ensure that taxpayers receive a fair return for the use and sale of wood fiber from NFS lands.
- Improve techniques for extracting fiber with minimal disturbance to the ecosystem and developing uses for under-utilized species.
- Research will provide information on the biology and management of non-wood forest products including wild mushroom, Spanish moss and pine straw.

Performance Measures

- Provide sustainable amounts of forest products removed from NFS lands and promote sustainability on other lands.

Situation

Timber is produced from Federal, State and Tribal lands, industrial private lands, and non-industrial private lands. Fifty-eight percent of the Nation's commercial forest land is held by 9.9 million non-industrial forest owners and provides two-thirds of the annual U.S. timber harvest. The national forests are the major producer of timber from Federal lands. Timber contributes to local and national economies and supports the production of forest products.

The NFS contains about 140 million acres of forested land. Timber production is a management objective on about 50 million acres. Timber sales are often designed to incorporate broader objectives, including insect and disease control, wildlife habitat management and fuels treatment. Agency sales averaged 3.7 billion board feet (BBF) from 1992 to 1996. In addition to traditional forest products, special forest products (e.g., medicinal materials, edible and decorative items) provide new potential benefits; and demand for these products is growing.

Objective 2.7: Forage

A sustainable supply of forage on suitable and capable lands for livestock and wildlife.

Grazing allotments will have NEPA analysis and management decisions implemented according to schedule, while supporting native populations of wildlife, aquatic and TE&S species.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Improve techniques for monitoring grass and shrub lands using the latest research findings.
- Research methods for restoring degraded lands through weed control and soil restoration.
- Monitor allotments to ensure that they are being managed as agreed.
- Maintain and increase the number of range structures.

Performance Measures

- Complete NEPA analysis on grazing allotments according to the schedule developed in response to direction in the FY 1995 Recission Bill.
- Restore deteriorated rangelands.
- Provide a sustainable supply of forage.

Situation

About 46.2 million acres of NFS lands are considered to be suitable for livestock grazing. Grazing meets people's needs for wool, leather, meat, and other products. Fees to the Federal Government from livestock grazing are either shared with local counties for roads and schools, returned to the U.S. Treasury, or used for range-betterment projects. The emphasis on restoring rangelands and riparian ecosystems to provide fish and wildlife habitat, recharge aquifers and prevent soil erosion will lead to changes in grazing management.

Objective 2.8: Minerals

Available mineral resources that comply with environmental and health standards.

The Forest Service will administer all minerals and geology operations to standard.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Research and share information on techniques for mitigating the environmental effects of mineral and geology operations.

Performance Measures

- Process an average of 13,000-14,000 energy and non-energy operations annually.
- Administer bonded and non-bonded, non-energy and energy operations to standard.

Situation

The United States is a minerals-rich Nation, with supplies of many metallic and precious metals sufficient to accommodate domestic demand through 2040. The country is a net exporter of gold, phosphate rock and molybdenum. The majority of mineral production is on privately held lands. Much of the onshore recoverable crude oil and natural gas is believed to reside under public lands.

NFS lands have about 6 million acres leased for oil and gas, over 150,000 mining claims, about 6,000 mineral material pits and quarries, over 11,000 new operations proposed each year and more than 9,000 operations to monitor and inspect. The Nation's largest coal mine is on NFS lands as well as much of its phosphate and lead production. The annual revenues exceed $200 million to the U.S. Treasury. These are received from lease rentals, royalties, bonus bids and sales. Many of these revenues are returned to the States where the mining occurred.

Goal 3

Ensure Organizational Effectiveness

An effective organization is needed to achieve the agency's mission. The Forest Service has chosen to emphasize two types of objectives within this goal:

1. programmatic objectives that are critical to achieving the agency's mission but whose outcomes, outputs and inputs are not easily separated among the mission-oriented goals and objectives; and
2. management initiatives which are designed to improve our organization, customer service, and the way we do business.

Objectives relate to generating scientific information, protecting and maintaining resources and facilities for agency and public use, and fulfilling basic land stewardship responsibilities to help ensure sustainable ecosystems and provide multiple benefits to people.

Key management initiatives are included to emphasize their importance in achieving the agency mission and to assure our partners and customers that we are correcting some deficiencies in our information and business practices. Integrated land and resource management requires good resource information and good financial information. Systems that integrate both types of information are necessary for internal management purposes, as well as for supporting communication with our partners and customers. The agency is committed to developing and maintaining integrated systems and business processes that are effective and efficient in meeting internal and external needs.

The agency is also committed to a customer service ethic focused on serving the needs of customers, including low-income, minority and historically underserved communities. This commitment includes having an innovative workforce that is representative of society.

Objective 3.1: Scientific Information

Better resource management decisions based on the best available scientific information and knowledge.

Science-based information and knowledge are available and incorporated into natural resource decision making. New technology is developed, adapted and transferred to facilitate more effective resource management. Forestland data collection is accomplished according to established schedules. Monitoring results are incorporated into land and resource management plan revisions.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Collect and assess the information necessary to meet the needs of resource managers and achieve the strategic goals and objectives of the agency.
- Build technology transfer programs into research programs to improve the availability and use of new information and technologies.
- Complete resource assessments through research, inventories, and monitoring.
- Incorporate management options into forest plans through existing research, inventories and monitoring.

Performance Measures

- Publish an average of 1,000 scientific papers in refereed (peer reviewed) journals each year.
- Complete revisions of land and resource management plans for about two-thirds (81 of 123) of the national forests and grasslands.
- Survey an average of 5 states each year to meet the identified Forest Inventory and Analysis cycle.

Situation

To make sound resource decisions, land managers must have better scientific and resource information, resource changes over time, and the functions of forest and grassland ecosystems. This essential knowledge is the output of several Forest Service programs, and must be gained at a reasonable cost.

For more than 60 years the Forest Service has conducted an inventory and analysis of forested lands in the United States. These programs provide land managers with an inventory of current natural resource conditions and changes over time, as well as the basis for forest plan revisions. Portions of the Forest Health Monitoring (FHM) and Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) programs are currently being integrated to decrease cost and improve quality. Programs include the national/regional condition surveys of FHM, the regional/forest level timber supply and forest ecosystem status of FIA, and the disease/pest surveys of the Aerial Pest Survey.

Inventory and analysis of natural resource conditions include an analysis of social factors that influence resource management decisions. In addition to economic effects, research is focusing on the attitudes, beliefs, and the values people hold toward forests.

Objective 3.2: Public Safety

A safer environment for the public and employees on NFS lands.

The Forest Service will reduce criminal activities associated with loss and damage to natural resources and structures below FY 1997 levels, and increase forest patrols to create a safer environment for visitors and employees.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Increase the presence of field-going law enforcement personnel to protect natural resources, property, visitors and employees.

Performance Measures

- Reduce criminal activities associated with loss and damage to natural resources and structures below FY 1997 levels.

Situation

Crime affects natural resources, Federal property, visitors to public lands, and Forest Service employees. Criminal activities on lands administered by the Forest Service are increasing. Timber theft, archaeological resource damage, vandalism, and marijuana growing are examples of the most common criminal activities on Federal lands.

Objective 3.3: Permit Administration

Customers are satisfied with the administration of special use authorizations.

The Forest Service will administer special use authorizations to adequately meet public, health and safety standards, and be responsive to applications for new authorizations.

Time Frame for Completion
By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective
- Update the methods used to accept, review and process special use proposals.
- Develop cost recovery regulations to improve accountability to applicants and authorization holders.

Performance Measures
- Administer special use permits to standard.

Situation
Special uses management involves providing authorizations for use of NFS lands by individuals, companies, organized groups, other Federal agencies and State or local governments in accordance with land and resource management plans. These authorizations vary in duration and commonly require payment of an annual fee. There are more than 62,000 active non-recreation special use authorizations on NFS lands, including communication sites, public and private roads, and energy related transmission rights-of-way. Authorizations are issued after an analysis of the need, potential environmental impacts, and consistency with agency management policy and plans. The authorization contains appropriate terms and conditions to ensure public safety and protection of NFS resources.

Objective 3.4: Boundary and Title Management

NFS resources and land title are protected through conflict-free and legally defensible boundary lines.

The Forest Service will survey, mark and maintain 63 percent of its boundary lines to standard.

Time Frame for Completion
By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective
- Maintain clearly identified boundaries to standard.

Performance Measures
- Survey and mark 63 percent of Forest Service boundaries to standard.

Situation
Responsible management of NFS lands requires that the agency has clearly defined boundaries for lands it administers and resolves trespass, encroachments and title claims in a timely manner. Boundaries established by legal surveys, which

are clearly marked and posted on the ground, provide the land manager with defined perimeters for resource activities and development, while protecting the property rights of adjacent landowners. Well-marked boundaries deter timber theft and encroachment on public lands and enhance the protection of environmentally sensitive areas. Increasing development in the wildland/urban interface accentuates the need for legally and physically identified boundaries. Currently, in areas where Forest Service lands are adjacent to highly populated areas, maintenance of surveyed boundaries needs to occur on a 1- or 2-year cycle, compared to the generally recommended 10-year cycle.

Objective 3.5: Capital Infrastructure

An efficient and effective infrastructure that supports public and administrative uses of National Forest System Lands.

The Forest Service will maintain and restore existing infrastructure (e.g., roads, facilities, and dams) to protect these capital investments where they are needed to provide safe, efficient and environmentally suitable support for agency activities and public use.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Research techniques for minimizing the environmental impacts of new and existing roads on water and sediment.
- Periodically evaluate the road system to ensure that it meets the agency's mission.
- Manage the existing road system to minimize environmental damage, enhance user safety and provide public benefits through an appropriate combination of maintenance, reconstruction and obliteration activities.
- Identify roads as potential candidates for obliteration where the public interest indicates they are no longer desirable.
- Develop lower impact techniques for obliterating out-of-service roads.

Performance Measures

- Conduct appropriate maintenance activities on an average of 40 percent of the road system each year.
- Obliterate an average of 1,500 miles of road each year.
- Complete an average of 10 percent of the high priority facility reconstruction projects each year.

Situation

Forest Service infrastructure is composed of all facilities, transportation systems, and utilities that are necessary to meet public and administrative needs. Most of the required infrastructure is in place. In some areas, the existing infrastructure does not meet current use demands, support the needs of management or meet acceptable standards for use and resource protection.

Most Forest Service buildings are at ranger districts and work centers in rural areas. Nearly half of the 16,000 facilities are over 30 years old, and many have deteriorated. Maintaining buildings for intended purposes will support a healthy and safe work environment, result in higher employee productivity, improve public

image, lower costs and improve customer service through better access.

Most roads in the system were constructed as timber access roads. However, they are now used for additional purposes, including access for hunting and fishing, range and wildlife use and management, fire control, dispersed recreation, and administration. Many of these roads are currently not maintained to the standard necessary for the types of use they receive. This lack of maintenance results in access difficulties and environmental damage, particularly to water quality.

Management Initiatives

The Forest Service strategy for ensuring organizational effectiveness focuses on open and informed decision making, supporting a diverse workforce and improving customer service. The agency will work with its diverse communities to identify the goods and services that it can best provide. To be more effective, the agency will strengthen line management accountability, pursue advancements in information technology, and increase investments in program monitoring and evaluation. The agency will provide an atmosphere in which employees are respected, trusted, and valued, and in which expertise and professionalism are rewarded. Information management will focus on implementing systems through which data can be easily shared, work coordinated, technologies linked, and customers served, both internally and externally. These Department and government-wide initiatives have established the context and direction for our management initiatives:

- **Secretary's Civil Rights Agenda:** In 1996, the Secretary of Agriculture established a Civil Rights Action Team to investigate civil rights violations and complaints by USDA customers and employees. The team, with representatives from the Forest Service and other USDA agencies, was charged with proposing recommendations that addressed institutional and underlying problems, and developing ways to implement actions to ensure accountability. In February 1997, the Secretary issued the team's final report and endorsed its recommendations. Implementing those recommendations is an essential part of the Forest Service strategic plan.
- **Environmental Justice Implementation:** Executive Order (E.O.) 12898, issued in 1994, requires each Federal agency to focus attention on the health and environmental conditions in minority and low-income communities, foster non-discrimination in programs that affect human health or the environment, and give minority and low-income communities better opportunities for public participation and access to information on issues affecting human and environmental health. In particular, the E.O. cites the effect of agency actions on subsistence hunting and fishing by Native Americans. The Forest Service has integrated consideration of environmental justice into its NEPA compliance and will continue to review and improve its environmental analysis, disclosure, and decision-making procedures to ensure that minority and low-income communities have opportunities for public participation and access to information. The Forest Service is also providing leadership and support in implementing a USDA-wide environmental justice policy and strategy.
- **Reinvention of the Federal Government:** The National Performance Review, conducted by Vice President Gore, emphasizes cutting red tape, putting customers first, empowering employees to get results, and getting back to basics. As a part of this effort, the Forest Service is adopting quality standards for customer service, training its employees in effective service, and providing for accountability through customer satisfaction surveys.
- **Financial Management:** In July 1996, the USDA Inspector General issued an adverse opinion criticizing the Forest Service financial management systems, operations, and workforce skills. Numerous internal and external reports have also docu-

mented weaknesses in Forest Service business practices. New Federal financial management requirements direct the agency to integrate financial management systems and utilize financial information for measurement of performance. The agency is committed to working with USDA's Office of the Chief Financial Officer and Office of Inspector General, OMB, and the General Accounting Office to improve financial management performance.

Management Initiative 1

WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT
An innovative, people-oriented work environment and workforce that is representative of society as a whole.

The Forest Service will achieve the following: 1) planning processes that fully integrate the needs and values of all publics, including low-income, minority and historically underserved communities, 2) program services and benefits that are fully extended to low-income, minority and historically underserved communities through aggressive systemic changes in program delivery projects; and 3) cultural competencies that will be fully implemented within the organization.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Management Initiative

- Implement pilot project to assist agency learning about the needs and values of low-income, minority and historically underserved communities.
- Translate collaborative relationship pilot projects for low-income, minority and historically underserved into on-going system changes in program development and delivery processes.
- Establish a team to resolve existing employee complaints and minimize the number of future complaints dealing with civil rights issues.
- Assess employee perceptions of communication, human resource management, job satisfaction, organizational management, service and quality, and supervision.

Performance Measures

- Measure change using indicators identified in the Civil Rights Action Team report.
- Measure employee satisfaction through the Continuous Improvement Process (CIP) questionnaire.
- Achieve improvement goals based on assessment of CIP results.

Situation

From 1995, the agency's staffing has decreased 11 percent to 37,184 full-time equivalents (FTEs) for 1997. With a smaller workforce and fewer dollars, more efficient means are necessary to ensure that the agency's mission is accomplished.

The character of the Nation's workforce is changing rapidly. Women, minorities, and people with disabilities collectively outnumber the rest of the population. As a result of changes in demographics and government-wide initiatives, the agency's business is also changing, requiring the addition of new disciplines. Providing a work environment in which employees and customers are valued is a target during the next 5 years. People in the work place cannot perform at peak

efficiency without appropriate physical facilities, and will not perform at peak efficiency without a satisfactory work environment. Assessments have shown that, for the benefit of both the employee and the customer, the work environment at the Forest Service needs attention.

The full array of agency benefits, services and products as well as programs that advance the understanding of ecosystem concepts and principles have not been extended to low-income, minority or historically underserved communities. Consequently, these populations remain in the periphery of the agency's delivery systems, and their use of forest resources may not comply with laws, regulations and policies. In addition, agency personnel often do not possess the cultural competencies and language skills to fully engage these populations. As a result, public contacts, marketing materials, conservation education, and collaborative stewardship techniques are not designed to encourage participation by these populations. At present, program services and products also do not measurably increase the quality of their visitation or their communities.

As a result of USDA customer and employee concerns, the Secretary established a Civil Rights Action Team, which recommended actions to improve the treatment of women and minorities. The Secretary accepted those recommendations, and the Forest Service is working to implement them. The Secretary has stated that he will improve the treatment of customers interacting with the Department and conditions in the work place so that employees are free from harassment, discrimination, and inequities.

Management Initiative 2

CUSTOMER SERVICE
All customers receive better service.

The Forest Service will implement customer service standards derived from customer surveys.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2000.

Strategies for Achieving the Management Initiative

- Participate in National Performance Review customer service task force.
- Develop program-specific questionnaires to evaluate the level and quality of service provided to customers.

Performance Measures

- Establish customer standards for Forest Service programs and assess customer satisfaction performance.

Situation

The Forest Service is committed to serving the public interest by working with Congress and the courts and other Federal departments. The agency also collaborates with local, State and Tribal governments and a spectrum of interest groups. To operate within such a setting is not only challenging, but requires a continuing, concerted effort to maintain the public trust and provide effective service.

Management Initiative 3

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT
Integrated information system; data structures and information management processes in place to support the agency's mission.

The IBM system will be completely installed and all employees will be system users. Major information processes will be re-engineered, and major applications will meet the needs of the agency.

Time Frame for Completion
By the end of 2000.

Strategies for Achieving the Management Initiative
- Evaluate information needs and develop and implement information management process changes.

Performance Measures
- Implement the IBM system throughout the agency.

Situation
To meet the increasing demands on the Forest Service, it is essential that all information needed to accomplish work tasks be integrated into an electronic medium where it can be readily accessed and easily shared. The current Data General system is outdated and outmoded. The new IBM system will provide not only the current administrative applications, but also a Geographic Information System (GIS) capability which will allow greater and quicker manipulation of the resource information crucial to resource decision-making. It will also provide better communications between the Forest Service and other public and private entities and individuals, thus facilitating the representation and integration of varying views into Forest Service decision making.

Management Initiative 4

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT
A sound financial system which supports resource decisions with timely, accurate information and financial expertise.

The Forest Service will have financial systems that support fiscal accountability and facilitate comparisons of costs, revenues and accomplishments. The agency will receive "clean" audit opinions on its financial statements for FY 1999 and each year thereafter, and use this financial information and expertise to make sound resource decisions.

Time Frame for Completion
By the end of 2000.

Strategies for Achieving the Management Initiative
- Work with USDA's Chief Financial Officer and Inspector General and the Government Accounting Office to review and improve the agency's financial systems.
- Remedy deficiencies identified in the USDA Inspector General's audit, GAO reports or business practices, and internal financial management reports.

Performance Measures

- The agency will receive "clean" audit opinions on its financial statements for FY 1999 and each year thereafter.

Situation

In July 1996, the USDA Inspector General issued an adverse opinion criticizing the systems, operations, and skills used by the Forest Service in financial management. The audit identified four areas of deficiency: 1) plant, property and equipment, 2) cash and unexpended appropriations, 3) revenues, reimbursements and accounts receivable, and 4) management issues.

Management Initiative 5

ORGANIZATION MANAGEMENT

An effective and efficient administrative organization that supports the Forest Service mission.

The Forest Service will develop and use a systematic approach to assessing the administration of the agency and will have established a baseline(s) from which to set improvement goals in future years.

Time Frame for Completion

By the end of 2002.

Strategies for Achieving the Management Initiative

- Develop methods to assess the improvement in the business functions.
- Implement business-like framework for management and accountability.

Performance Measures

- Develop and incorporate outcome-oriented performance elements for employee standards.
- Implement cash management initiatives including establishing electronic funds transfer for all program and vendor payments.
- Implement provisions of the Debt Collection Improvement Act of 1996, including improved debt prevention techniques to reduce program losses, and procedures for referring and recording delinquent debt to Treasury for cross-servicing and administrative offset.

Situation

The President's National Performance Review (NPR) encouraged agencies to review their business processes in order to identify efficiencies. The Forest Service reinvention study identified a number of processes that could be improved through re-engineering. The Congress has also taken steps to increase accountability for performance across Government. The public is demanding more efficient and effective governmental operations. These demands for a more businesslike framework for management and accountability coincide with an era of decreasing Federal budgets.

FS

Linkage of Goals to Annual Performance Plan

The three general strategic goals and their objectives are the basis for the annual goals contained in the Forest Service Annual Performance Plan required under section 1115 of GPRA. Since the general strategic goals are broad and longer-term, they have been subdivided into objectives which are more easily quantified. They provide focus and emphasis, assist in achieving the general strategic goals, and can be identified for a 3- to 5-year timeframe. Each objective is crosswalked to the current budget structure in the agency's annual performance plan.

Most of the performance measures used in this plan will also be used in the annual performance plan. Additional performance indicators will be identified and used to monitor progress toward achievement of annual goals. In any given year, priority concerns related to a goal or availability of new data may lead to the use of different measures. Where applicable, trends and baselines will be included. Where possible, indices or combinations of indicators will also be identified for the objectives, although development of these lies in the future in most cases. Annual accomplishments for the objectives and annual performance plan goals will be recorded in the Management Attainment Reporting (MAR) system and other data bases until the agency's corporate data management plan is fully implemented.

The Annual Performance Plan will constitute the basic management tool to direct resources to implement key strategies and identify specific efforts that will be used to achieve goals, objectives and performance measures. Performance plans will include estimated staff years and program costs required to achieve performance goals.

Goal 1: Ensure Sustainable Ecosystems is linked to the following budget program activities: State & Private Forestry (S&PF), National Forest System (NFS), Land Acquisition, Wildland Fire Preparedness, Wildland Fire Operations, Permanent Appropriations, Cooperative Work and Trust Funds, and the Reforestation Trust Funds. Goal 2: Provide Multiple Benefits is linked to S&PF, NFS, Reconstruction and Construction, Wildland Fire Preparedness, Wildland Fire Operations, Permanent Appropriations, and Cooperative Work and Trust Funds. Goal 3: Ensure Organizational Effectiveness is linked to Research, S&PF, NFS, Construction and Reconstruction, and Permanent Appropriations.

Resources Needed

Budget Needs

The resource conditions identified in the RPA assessment provide the focus for the general strategic goals and objectives in this strategic plan. Quantifiable information on resource needs is still being developed. Considerable investments are being made, and will continue to be required to protect and restore ecosystems and to meet appropriate levels of demand for uses, goods, services and information. It is assumed that financial resources will continue to come from a variety of sources, including appropriated funds, contributions from partners, fees, and cost savings from new technology and re-engineering.

The non-defense discretionary (annually appropriated) portion of the Federal budget is expected to decline as a share of the total. Funding increases will likely not keep up with inflation, resulting in a Forest Service appropriated budget that is flat or declining over the next few years. The agency is not anticipating significant increases in total available funding within the lifetime of this strategic plan unless internal efficiencies can be achieved and external funding secured.

The Forest Service budgets for FY 1995, 1996 and 1997 were relatively stable in terms of discretionary appropriations. However, significant increases in the Wildland Fire Management Appropriation between FY 1995 and FY 1997 have offset overall

decreases, some rather substantial. Other increases in some permanent appropriated funds (salvage, K-V, etc.) have also partially offset the discretionary reductions.

Achievement of the general strategic goals and objectives will require redirection of funding within and between budget line items under the current budget level and structure. The agency will maximize its efforts to achieve these goals and objectives within this context, and continue to request additional funds to accelerate their accomplishment. Approved employment levels decreased from 38,330 in FY 1995 to 37,184 in FY 1997. FTE levels are expected to decline slightly from the FY 1997 level.

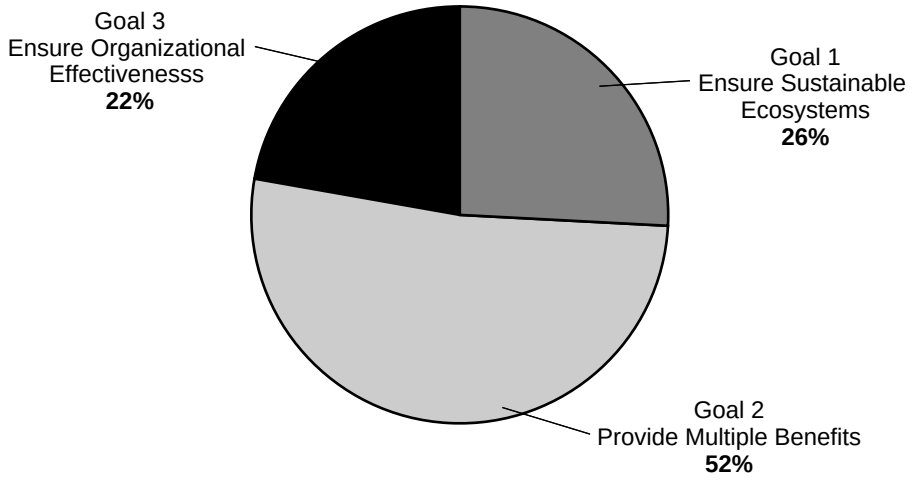
Priorities

All of the goals and objectives in this plan are important. The annual performance plans accompanying the agency's budget submissions for FY 1999 and beyond will establish the priorities or rate of implementation for the goals and objectives in the strategic plan.

Preliminary estimates of the costs for achieving individual goals were done for the FY 1999 Performance Plan. These costs were developed using a cross-walk linking programmatic strategic objectives with the agency's budget structure. Applying this cross-walk to the FY 1997 Final Congressional Appropriations results in the following percentage distribution of total budgetary costs (i.e., discretionary appropriations, permanent appropriations and trust funds) among the three strategic goals:

Goal 1: Ensure Sustainable Ecosystems 26%
Goal 2: Provide Multiple Benefits 52%
Goal 3: Ensure Organizational Effectiveness 22%

Forest Service FY 1997 Resource Allocations



As the agency refines its cost estimates and implements its priorities under this strategic plan, future funding distributions are likely to be somewhat different than those displayed above.

Non-Budget Needs

Implementation of this strategic plan will involve not only a redirection of funds within the current budget, but will also include some changes in how the agency approaches its mission. This will involve a different focus within Research that is more closely aligned to the agency general goals and objectives, increased collaboration with and participation by the American public, the use of an adaptive management approach and increased monitoring and evaluation to assess the results.

Research-Management Collaboration: Implementing the ecosystem approach to management will improve planning and integrate ecological, social and other information into decision-making. Managers will consider people's attitudes, beliefs and values toward the land and involve them in the decision-making processes. Cooperative teams of scientists and managers in assessment projects will be used to address resource management issues. The Forest Service will work closely with other agencies, the academic community and partners to bring science into decision-making. As the ecosystem approach to management evolves, the Forest Service will fulfill its responsibility to provide goods and services for people, with renewed attention to the capabilities of natural systems.

Adaptive Management: One premise of the ecosystem to management is that scientific knowledge will continue to expand, changing our understanding of how ecosystems work and how they are influenced by human activity. By remaining flexible and allowing for the incorporation of new knowledge and changing conditions, managers can adapt their approach and thereby improve the results of their efforts over time. It may be necessary to make organizational changes, as appropriate, in response to changing conditions and needs. No matter what challenges are brought by increased understanding of the physical, biological, social, and political world, the Forest Service will rely on adaptive management as a key to its success.

Monitoring and Evaluation: In order to apply the concept of adaptive management, a comprehensive program of monitoring and evaluation will be necessary. Sustainable forest management requires forest managers to measure and judge their collective progress while providing the public with a record of their accountability. Monitoring and evaluation are required components of all land and resource management plans and are essential parts of sustainable forest management. Although key to achieving the agency's mission, they have historically been weak links in the agency's management practices. In response, the Forest Service and the EPA have established a Forest Health Monitoring Program.

Program Evaluation

In addition to using the results of the RPA Assessment, the Forest Service used a number of other reviews and evaluations to help determine agency goals and objectives. These included the results of the Chief's reviews of regions and stations, Deputy and program reviews, and GAO and OIG audits. The results of on-site customer satisfaction surveys and targeted customer focus group surveys were also used to evaluate programs and establish objectives.

Evaluating whether or not we are achieving the desired outcomes will occur through a variety of means. This evaluation will be accomplished largely through monitoring of program results on an annual basis and on a longer term basis for strategic goals and outcomes. Evaluating program results for possible revision of the strategic goals and objectives will require consideration of information from a wide variety of sources.

Strategic Management Reviews: The agency is currently developing a strategy for reviews that address the need for management and accountability at a strategic,

corporate and integrated scale. This review mechanism, tentatively called a Strategic Management Review, would not replace the current system of program, activity and compliance reviews; rather it would evaluate corporate performance towards achieving the agency's mission and strategic goals. The focus would be on results, outcomes and linkages among RPA and GPRA strategic goals, budget, and other planning (forest, Research, and S&PF plans). For example, a strategic management review would look at whether or not annual performance plans and budgets were actually producing the desired outcomes. Broad customer satisfaction assessment would be a key component of these reviews. The results of these reviews would be used to revise both the strategic plan and the annual performance plans. It is estimated that it will take approximately 2 years to develop a clear and shared understanding of how to assess results at the corporate level and select the best methodology. Strategic management reviews would then take place on at least an annual basis (more frequently if needed).

These strategic management reviews would be supplemented by information and analyses from a number of other sources, including updates to the RPA Assessment, customer feedback and public comment, Chief, Deputy and Program reviews, GAO and OIG reviews, ecoregional assessments, and the results of resource monitoring and evaluation.

Individual Performance Evaluations: Accountability for achieving agency goals and objectives will be linked to individual performance. Key performance measures and indicators will be integrated into the standards used to evaluate annual performance for individual employees. Some line officer performance standards for FY 1997 have been modified to reflect this linkage to agency goals and objectives.

Monitoring and Evaluation Efforts: A number of laws authorize the Forest Service to monitor and evaluate its programs and activities. Such provisions are a part of the National Forest Management Act, the Forest Ecosystems and Atmospheric Pollution Act, the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act, the Clean Water Act, and most recently, the GPRA.

Current monitoring and evaluation efforts yield information that is essential in ecological assessments, forest planning, forest pest and disease management, and forest health monitoring. There are also monitoring and evaluation activities related to fiscal accountability, legislative responsibility, and workplace diversity, as well as other management responsibilities. The Forest Service will continue to strengthen its monitoring and evaluation programs and will more effectively use the information these programs provide.

In addition to their use in adaptive management, monitoring and evaluation will also continue to provide information about Forest Service compliance with the law. The Forest Service and others, including industry, environmental groups, and other Federal agencies, will continue to monitor and evaluate forest management practices and results. Such efforts have confirmed the need for more broadly focused efforts as an integral part of ecosystem management.

Role of External Entities

While public input was sought to help frame agency goals and strategies, this strategic plan was completed without the assistance of non-government contractors and no non-government resources were used to produce this final plan.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Strategic Plan

Table of Contents

Introduction

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture is the lead Federal agency for conservation on private land. NRCS, formerly the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), serves the United States and its territories, commonwealths, and freely associated governments. SCS was established in 1935 to carry out a continuing program of soil and water conservation on the Nation's private and nonfederal land. NRCS, established by the Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994 (7 U.S.C. 6962), combines the authorities of the former SCS and directs sixteen additional financial or technical assistance programs for natural resource conservation and rural development.

NRCS provides conservation technical assistance through local conservation districts to individuals, communities, watershed groups, tribal governments, Federal, state, and local agencies, and others. The NRCS staff at the local level work with state and local conservation staff and volunteers in a partnership to assist individuals and communities to care for natural resources. NRCS also develops technical guidance for conservation planning and assistance. This technical guidance is tailored to local conditions and is widely used by NRCS staff and governmental and nongovernmental organizations to ensure that conservation is based on sound science.

NRCS is proud to be partners in conservation with America's private landowners, conservation districts, state and local conservation agencies, and others. This partnership has stabilized the American landscape, helped increase agricultural productivity, kept agriculture profitable, improved our environment, and improved the quality of life in rural areas. The dynamic nature of agricultural and environmental systems means that conservation is a continuous process — one that is challenged to keep pace with natural resource conditions, land use, market forces, and production technology and trends, among others.

Legislative Mandates

Congress provides funds through appropriations and the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) for NRCS to provide this technical, planning, and financial assistance to individual, communities and other customers. The programs listed on the following page comprise the core of NRCS conservation assistance. (*see table, page 6-40*)

Partnerships and Coordination

NRCS coordinates with USDA agencies and many others in pursuit of the NRCS mission. Perhaps the most prominent example of this close coordination within USDA is the relationship between NRCS and the Farm Service Agency (FSA). The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) are administered by FSA, while NRCS provides the technical assistance to landowners to accomplish program conservation goals. This relationship will be critical to successful implementation of the nationwide initiative to encourage installation of buffer strips to prevent pollution and protect watersheds.

The number and mix of coordinating agencies varies in response to changing natural resource conditions and emerging strategic initiatives. In research and education NRCS works primarily with the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), Forest Service (FS), Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Major collaborators in data collection and analysis include FS, National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), Economic Research Service (ERS), USGS, FWS, EPA, COE, and BLM. Examples include: collaboration with BLM to achieve

NRCS Program	Legislative Mandate
Conservation Operations Conservation Technical Assistance Soil Survey Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting Conservation Plant Materials Centers Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative	Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1935 (P.L.74-46) Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977 (P.L.95-192) Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (P.L.104-127)
Watershed Surveys and Planning	Watershed and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (P.L. 83-566)
Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Watershed Operations Emergency Watershed Protection Operations Small Watersheds	Flood Control Act of 1944 (P.L. 78-534) Emergency Operations authorizations of 1950 (P.L. 81-516, Sec. 216) Emergency Agricultural Credit Adjustment Act of 1978 (P.L. 95-334, Sec. 403-405) Watershed and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (P.L.83-566), as amended
Forestry Incentives Program	Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1978 (P.L. 95-313), as amended
Resource Conservation and Development Program	Flood and Agriculture Act of 1962 (P.L.87-703, Sec. 102) Agriculture and Food Act of 1981 (P.L.97-98, Sec. 1528-1538)
Wetlands Reserve Program	Food Security Act of 1985 (P.L.99-198, Sec. 1237) Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act (P.L.101-624, Title XVI, Sec. 1438) Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993 (P.L.103-66) Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (P.L.104-127)
Environmental Quality Incentives Program	Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (P.L.104-127)
Farmland Protection Program	Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (P.L.104-127, Sec. 388)
Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program	Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (P.L.104-127, Sec. 387)
Conservation Farm Option	Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (P.L.104-127, Sec. 335)
Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers	Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-624, Sec. 2501)

the goals of the Surface Mine Control and Reclamation Programs; collaboration with NOAA in the Coastal Zone Management Program; collaboration with EPA in the Chesapeake Bay Agreement, National Estuary Program, and Clean Lakes Program; and coordination with FWS, EPA, and COE in wetland determination and delineation. Memoranda of Understanding also have been signed with EPA for nonpoint source technical cooperation, with CSREES for water quality data and training, and with ARS and USGS for cooperation on water quality research.

For program delivery, NRCS primarily works with FS, Rural Development (RD), FSA, and CSREES. Internationally we cooperate with agencies such as FS, Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS), ARS, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and other organizations such as the InterAmerican Development Bank, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank), and the Inter-American Institute of Cooperation in Agriculture, among others.

Strategic Planning in NRCS

Assessment and analysis of human and natural resources are the foundation of strategic planning in NRCS. This plan is built on analysis of resource data collected from a number of sources, including:

- Resource analyses and assessments completed as part of strategic planning in each of the six NRCS administrative regions
- NRCS's National Resources Inventory
- Water quality surveys conducted by state water quality agencies
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency data and analyses
- U.S. Geological Survey data and analyses
- U.S. Census.

Analysis and assessment of these data were drawn from ongoing work under the auspices of the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977 and from a special set of core resource assessment and analysis projects undertaken specifically to support strategic planning.

Information from past and ongoing evaluations of conservation programs has also been used extensively in the preparation of this plan. Specifically, evaluations of the Great Plains Conservation Program, the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program, the Conservation Technical Assistance Program, and the Water Quality Program were used to develop this plan.

This plan draws from a number of strategic plans that have been prepared by the agency since the 1970s. Regional strategic plans prepared in each of NRCS's six administrative regions were drawn on heavily to set goals and identify strategic objectives. Other plans include the SCS Framework Plan (1970s), USDA National Conservation Program (1980s) and its update in 1988, two strategic planning initiatives in the 1990s, and a comprehensive customer assessment in 1994-1995.

Finally, NRCS drew heavily on input from our Federal partners, the conservation partnership, state and local agencies, nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations, and agricultural groups, and from consultation with Congress and its supporting agencies. The resulting draft strategic plan then was coordinated with our Federal coordinating agencies. Because of these contributions, the NRCS plan reflects not just an agency perspective, but also that of a much broader network of landowners, communities, agencies, and others concerned about the conservation of the Nation's natural resource base.

Key External Factors

Factors beyond the control of NRCS may strongly influence the ability of the agency and the conservation partnership to meet the conservation goals outlined in this strategic plan. The most influential external factors include: market influences on landuse decisions, state and local landuse and environmental policies, unusual or prolonged adverse climatic conditions, investments in conservation technologies, changing agricultural structure, and financial resources available to the agency.

- With the passage of the 1996 farm bill, U.S. agriculture began a transition from subsidy-oriented to market-driven. As American farmers and ranchers make this transition their management decisions will be strongly influenced by market forces. Variation in commodity prices can cause large shifts in the kind of crops grown as well as in land use (e.g., shifts of land among rangeland, pastureland, and cropland). As land use changes, so do the conservation needs of the land, landowners, and managers. Substantial shifts in land use could trigger unforeseen conservation demands, challenging our ability to achieve our performance targets for natural resource conservation.
- Considerable variation exists in state and local government landuse and environmental policies. Some states have experienced a proliferation of policies and regulation while others have seen little activity. In some cases state and local policies are increasing the complexity of natural resource management and creating a framework within which NRCS conservation objectives must be adjusted to fit state and local priorities. In areas where landuse and environmental policies are lax or lacking, the difficulty in achieving NRCS strategic objectives may be even greater.
- Weather extremes have always posed a challenge to agriculture and conservation. Episodic events such as drought, flooding, etc., can cause substantial damage to soil, water, and related natural resources. If these events occur on a large scale, or are unusually frequent during the next five years, it will be extremely difficult to achieve the conservation improvements envisioned in this plan.
- NRCS depends heavily on other agencies, the land grant institutions, and the private sector for its research and development (R&D) investment in conservation technology in order to keep up with the pace of change in the agricultural sector. If conservation technology R&D does not continue to be responsive to changing environmental and agricultural conditions, the partnership may be poorly equipped to meet emerging needs and achieve NRCS conservation targets identified in this plan.
- Changing agricultural structure poses a continuing challenge to conservation. The geographic shifts in production, the growth of small and large production units and loss of mid-size farms, and the vertical integration of many industries, particularly livestock production, all influence the ability of NRCS to address resource conservation objectives.
- Budget resources available to NRCS to achieve our general goals, strategic objectives, and performance goals can profoundly influence the ability of the agency and partnership to achieve the outlined objectives. If the budget assumptions upon which this plan was based prove too optimistic, then we will not be able to achieve the performance targets outlined in this plan.

Mission

Providing national leadership in a partnership effort to help people conserve, improve, and sustain our natural resources and environment.

NRCS carries out the agency mission through many different programs and in cooperation and coordination with numerous partners. NRCS technical experts help land managers and communities to take a comprehensive approach in planning the use and

protection of soil, water, and related resources on private and other nonfederal land across the Nation. NRCS assistance to private landowners is provided through conservation districts, which are units of local government created by state law. NRCS works in a long-standing partnership with State conservation agencies and other State and local agencies such as Resource Conservation and Development councils and locally elected farmer and rancher committees, Federal agencies, tribal governments, and private sector organizations.

The first step in providing national leadership for conservation is identifying natural resource status, conditions, and trends; and making this information available to landowners and communities to assist in their landuse decision making. Over the past 100 years, USDA has monitored resource condition through soil surveys, conservation needs assessments, and natural resource inventories. These efforts, all based on the best science available at the time, have sought to present an accurate, unbiased look at natural resources.

NRCS also develops conservation standards, specifications, and guidelines to ensure that conservation systems recommended to landowners and communities nationwide are technically sound. These technical standards ensure that conservation is based on sound and up-to-date science. Such technical guides are used not only by NRCS staff, but also by private consultants and engineers, conservation district staff, state agencies, and our Federal partners.

Goals

Achieving conservation–that state of harmony between people and land–requires a partnership among landowners, communities, and the land. That partnership is as varied as the Nation's landscape and as the people who call that local landscape home.

Our strategic plan is built on two goals that reflect that partnership between people and the land. In our first general goal, we make a commitment to provide individuals and communities with the support and help they need to be effective stewards of the natural resources on their property and in their communities. Our second general goal is a commitment to the land–to maintain a healthy and productive land that sustains food and fiber production, and functioning watersheds and natural systems, enhances the environment, and improves urban and rural landscapes.

Although we recognize that breaking conservation into singular objectives and strategies is essential to effective planning, we recognize also that it is artificial. On the ground, where conservation occurs, resources are inextricably linked. Soil resources are linked to water resources, and both are linked with grazing land, wetlands, and wildlife habitat. The real challenge for conservationists is to work with landowners and communities to bring all the pieces together on the landscape to achieve the larger vision of conservation–people in harmony with the land.

Outcomes

Conservation expands the range of products the land can produce. Our contribution to our Nation's well-being is to help diverse groups of farmers, ranchers, landowners, and communities produce the full range of products of the land. By achieving our goals and objectives, we will contribute to three broad national outcomes:

- Sustainable, productive, and prosperous farms, ranches, and communities;
- Healthy people; and a
- Healthy natural environment.

NRCS's unique contribution to these national outcomes is to work with people and the land to sustain and enhance the natural resources and partnerships on which agriculture, communities, and our environment depend.

Goal 1

Individuals and their neighbors working together as effective and willing stewards of the natural resources on their property and in their communities.

The opportunities to support and enhance stewardship of America's private land are many and varied. Millions of farmers and ranchers and other landowners are already effective stewards of their land. Communities across the Nation are organized to address their local natural resource concerns and develop locally suitable approaches for solving problems.

An ethic of stewardship by itself, however, is not enough. This ethic must be supported by knowledge of the land and how to work with the land–science and technology that can help us to understand the dynamics of the environment and the connections among environmental quality, economic prosperity, and quality of life, and how to apply the best possible management on the land. Our strategic plan lays out three strategic objectives to support stewardship by individuals and communities. Through our work we will seek to achieve: 1) a strong and effective grassroots partnership across the Nation; 2) a diverse and well-served customer base; and 3) a landscape of landowners and communities with the science-based conservation information and technologies they need to manage their land.

This goal and its objectives support USDA's goal 1.3–Provide access to capital and credit to enhance the ability of rural communities to develop, grow, and invest in projects to expand economic opportunities and improve the quality of life for farm, ranch, and rural residents; and goal 3.1–Promote sustainable production of food and fiber products while maintaining a quality environment and strong natural resource base. In addition, many of the Strategies identified under this goal support USDA's Management Initiatives, including: ensuring that all customers and employees are treated fairly and equitably, with dignity and respect; improving customer service by streamlining and restructuring county offices; creating a unified system of information technology management; and promoting volunteerism.

Objective 1.1

A strong and effective grassroots conservation partnership across the United States and its territories, commonwealths, and affiliated governments.

NRCS partners with many governmental agencies, private sector entities, and grassroots organizations to pursue conservation goals. The nearly 12,000 NRCS employees and 8,000 district or state conservation agency staff work together in a unique Federal-local partnership in over 2,500 Service Centers across the United States. Authorized Resource Conservation and Development councils (RC&D) number 290 and cover at least 60 percent of the U.S. landscape. These Councils provide leadership and coordination for a wide variety of natural resource and community development projects. NRCS also works with agricultural producer groups, conservation groups, industry, and businesses across the country.

Time Frame for Completion

Strengthening the conservation partnership is a continuing process strongly influenced by changing agricultural structure and the needs of our customer base.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Increase training of field staff and partners. Strengthening the conservation partnership depends on maintaining a cadre of highly skilled technical staff capable of meeting landowner and community requests for conservation assistance. Accelerated training of field staff and partners is essential to meet the growing complexity of the conservation challenge and to stay current with rapidly changing science and technologies.
- Broaden and strengthen the conservation partnership. Meeting an increasingly complex conservation challenge requires new and broader partnerships to ensure that enough funding and the right technical expertise is available to solve problems. NRCS's customers and partners are growing more diverse, creating demands for new products and services. Broadening the partnership to include new public and private entities, with particular emphasis on minority- and women-owned business participation, will be essential.
- Help to achieve consensus in the locally led process through sound science, sensible economics, appropriate technology, and current information. NRCS will provide the natural resource data and assessment for landowners, conservation districts, and other institutions and communities, which forms the basis of locally led conservation assistance. NRCS will work through the locally led process to bring people together in a shared vision for their land and their communities and to leverage the interests *and* resources of these varied groups to work for conservation.

Performance Measures

- A strong and effective grassroots conservation partnership will increase public awareness of the need for and benefits of conservation. Ways to measure that NRCS is helping to strengthen and support the conservation partnership are: 1) to measure meaningful, field-based training of NRCS conservation assistance staff that improves their ability to support the partnership and customers in conservation planning; and 2) to measure the increase in contributions to conservation efforts leveraged by the conservation partnership that reflects the commitment and strength of that partnership.

  Baseline The National Employee Development Center is constructing an adequate baseline and tracking system.

  Target By 1999, field staff who deliver conservation assistance to landowners and communities will be receiving 2 weeks of field-based training each year to improve technical excellence in conservation planning and resource assessment.

  Baseline The Conservation Operations Division, Conservation Technical Assistance Team are constructing an adequate baseline and tracking system capable of aggregating internal data and including private, nongovernmental contributions.

  Target By 2002, the financial and "in-kind" contributions made to conservation–and leveraged through NRCS programs–by other Federal, state, local, and nongovernmental entities will have doubled from 1992 levels.

Objective 1.2

A diverse and well-served customer base across the United States and its territories, commonwealths, and affiliated governments.

NRCS and our partners will have to maintain a diverse and satisfied customer base to achieve goals for conservation and environmental quality. This means improving service to traditional customers while reaching out to nontraditional and underserved customers. It also means understanding customers' values, needs, and attitudes.

Modern agriculture is remarkably diverse in terms of geographic, enterprise, economic, and technological attributes. Enterprises vary widely in size, production practices, level of modernization, commodities produced, and employment. There are growing numbers of large and small farms and declining numbers of mid-size farms. Of special concern are the Nation's nearly 44,000 minority-owned farms and ranches, where declines in numbers have been disproportionate. The majority of these farms are small–in size and sales class–and are concentrated in the West, Southeast, and East.

Time Frame for Completion

Ensuring high-quality conservation assistance, responsiveness to customer needs, and a diverse customer base is a continuing process and is influenced strongly by the changing structure of agriculture and the Nation's environmental agenda.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Increase assistance delivery to socially disadvantaged, minority, and women customers: Significant steps will be taken to improve service to these customers, including developing outreach strategies and ensuring their implementation; increasing representation of these customers on conservation district boards and RC&D councils; developing information and technologies tailored to the needs of these customers; ensuring that Service Centers are situated to improve access to assistance for these customers and where Centers are not easily accessible, develop innovative service approaches (e.g., mobile offices, non-traditional hours of operation); and developing a mechanism to track improving service.
- Improve the quality of conservation assistance delivered to all customers: Providing quality conservation assistance to our customers requires understanding their conservation needs and providing the technology necessary to keep them competitive while achieving conservation goals for the Nation. NRCS will accelerate outreach to underserved and nontraditional customers, maintain commitment to one-on-one conservation assistance delivery, and develop strategies to increase field staff time available to assist customers.

Performance Measures

- The conservation customer base is becoming increasingly diversified as are their conservation assistance needs, yet we know that many potential customers have not yet been reached. Ways to measure how well NRCS is performing in meeting customer needs effectively and also reaching out to a broader customer base are: 1) to measure customer satisfaction with the products and services provided by NRCS, and 2) to measure the increase in the numbers of previously under-served groups receiving conservation assistance.

  Baseline A Gallup Poll survey in 1995 indicated that 83 percent of customers were satisfied or highly satisfied with NRCS products and services. The Operations Management and Oversight Division is designing a valid customer survey system.

Target By 2000, 90 percent of all NRCS customers will be satisfied or highly satisfied with NRCS products and services.

Baseline Data are collected in various formats at the program level but are not aggregated nationally. The Civil Rights Divisions are leading the effort to develop an adequate baseline and design and implement a reliable tracking system.

Target By 1999, we will double the numbers of socially disadvantaged and minority customers receiving conservation assistance from 1992 levels.

Objective 1.3

Private landowners and communities with the science-based information and technologies they need to conserve natural resources.

Effective stewardship depends on having the right science-based information and technology tools. Creating this information and developing these tools require a substantial investment in natural resource inventory and assessment. But data collection, monitoring, and assessment are only part of the conservation equation. Translating this information into conservation technology, technical guides, and performance standards is the backbone of NRCS. These technical works provide a measure of quality control and conservation consistency across the Nation.

NRCS faces a continuous challenge to provide current, science-based conservation information and conservation technologies. Scientific and technological progress is essential to keeping up with customer needs. NRCS has answered this challenge by improving conservation information and technology innovation, quality, and access.

Time Frame for Completion

Providing landowners and communities with science-based information and technologies needed to support conservation is an continuous process strongly influenced by changes in science and technology, market signals, environmental trends, and national agricultural and environmental policy.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Develop information and technologies to support conservation: Agricultural production and natural resource conservation relationships are dynamic and technology is challenged to respond to market forces and public demand for a healthy environment. NRCS will develop the conservation tools and information needed to support conservation planning and practices, conservation guidelines and standards, and standard resource assessment and monitoring protocols for evaluating progress.
- Strengthen and expand natural resource assessment capability: NRCS must be prepared to work with a much more complex conservation agenda. Providing quality information and assistance on a broad realm of natural resource issues, such as water quality, air quality, biodiversity, and global climate change, among others requires strong natural resource assessment capabilities. NRCS will improve systems to monitor natural resources status and conditions, and improve assessment of the potential impacts of these trends on sustainability of agricultural production and natural resource quality.

- Strengthen the agency's technical service delivery through science-based, state-of-the-art technology: The Internet, precision farming, and geographic information systems gradually will become standard tools for producers and conservationists. The commitment to science-based technology delivery will require constant technical innovation and training for NRCS staff, and abilities to anticipate and develop technologies and conservation systems to address agriculture's contribution to emerging natural resource concerns, particularly air quality, global climate change, and biodiversity.

Performance Measures

- Landowners and communities can make effective conservation decisions when they have the information and tools they need to make informed decisions. Ways to measure that NRCS is improving the availability and accessibility of science-based information and technologies for conservation are: 1) to measure the increase in availability of geospatial interpretations of soil survey information to support conservation planning, and 2) to measure the development and implementation of resource health indicators and improved ability to monitor and assess resource status, conditions, and trends.

  Baseline As of August 1997, 590 of the estimated 2400 soil surveys for nonfederal land needing digitization were in progress or completed and available through electronic sources to staff, the conservation partnership, and customers.

  Target By 2002, geospatial interpretations of soil survey information for all nonfederal land in the United States and its territories, commonwealths, and affiliated governments will be easily accessible to our customers, partners, and the general public.

  Baseline The Resource Assessment and Strategic Planning Division is leading the effort to develop an integrated set of resource health indicators, an adequate baseline, and reliable tracking system. Development of accepted health indicators is ongoing.

  Target By 2000, resource assessment tools and data collection systems will be in place to monitor and assess changes in soil quality, grazing land health, wetland functions, and watershed health.

Goal 2

A healthy and productive land that sustains food and fiber production, sustains functioning watersheds and natural systems, enhances the environment, and improves urban and rural landscapes

Conservation of a healthy land begins with conserving the quality and productivity of the soils. Soils are a basic natural resource. The soil is a living system that supplies plants with a medium in which to grow and buildings with the support they need to stand. Soils filter water to make it drinkable, fishable, and swimmable. They store water and capture and store carbon from the air. Soil management and conservation to improve the quality of soil resources will be the foundation of every conservation system or plan that NRCS recommends to individuals or communities.

Soil conservation is fundamental to achieving a healthy land, but soil conservation alone is not enough. Effective conservation depends on an integrated approach to manage natural resources soil, water, air, plants and animals and their interactions.

These natural resources are the building blocks from which a healthy land is constructed. Our strategic plan lays out five strategic objectives to improve the critical components of a healthy land. Through our work we will seek to achieve marked improvements in: 1) cropland productivity and quality, 2) water quality and quantity, 3) grazing land health, 4) wetlands function, and 5) fish and wildlife habitat on agricultural land.

This goal and its objectives support USDA's goal 3.1–Promote sustainable production of food and fiber products while maintaining a quality environment and strong natural resource base; and goal 3.2–Promote sustainable management of public lands; protect and restore critical forest land, rangeland, wilderness, and aquatic ecosystems. The health and condition of privately owned land that borders public land will profoundly influence the health of that public land. Thus, while NRCS works on private land, its activities support the efforts of agencies with responsibility for public land. Similarly, many of the wildlife resources associated with public land management efforts depend largely, or at least in part, on the quality of habitat on private land or the presence of biological corridors to maintain healthy populations.

Objective 2.1

Healthy and productive cropland sustaining U.S. agriculture and the environment.

The rate of soil erosion is the single best indicator for which we have data to estimate whether soils are improving, stable, or degrading. Considerable progress has been made in reducing soil erosion on cultivated cropland, however the job is far from finished. Sheet, rill, and wind erosion continue to be problems on highly erodible and non-highly erodible cropland. Irrigation-induced erosion and ephemeral gully erosion are increasingly recognized as significant factors in overall erosion rates.

Soil erosion is not the only cause of reduced soil quality. We now understand that the quality of the Nation's soil also is degraded by declines in organic-matter content, reduced diversity and activity of soil microorganisms, compaction, salinization, acidification, alkalinity, nutrient depletion, and chemical or heavy metal contamination.

Time Frame for Completion

Maintaining healthy and productive cropland capable of sustaining a productive U.S. agriculture and the environment is a continuing process challenged by changing environmental conditions, producer response to market factors, and environmental and agricultural policy.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Promote conservation planning and management approaches that improve soil quality: Improving soil quality is essential to meeting our goals for a healthy land. NRCS will take a comprehensive approach to conservation planning to improve soil quality, including developing a soil quality index; emphasizing conservation systems and practices that improve multiple soil factors; and improving soils interpretations, erosion prediction, and soil quality assessment tools.
- Intensify soil conservation on non-highly erodible cropland: Attention to the conservation needs through USDA programs of some of the Nation's best land has slipped. In many cases conservation needs on non-highly erodible cropland

are even greater than on highly erodible cropland. Conservation assistance is needed on non-HEL land not just to address soil erosion but also to contribute to meeting broader environmental goals such as water quality (e.g., pollution prevention, nonpoint source reduction) air quality (e.g., visibility), and wildlife protection (e.g., threatened and endangered species habitat), among others. NRCS will increase conservation technical assistance on non-highly erodible cropland and emphasize soil conservation practices that do not require financial assistance to producers.

- Facilitate transitions to sustainable systems on the most highly erodible cropland: By 1992, erosion on about 42 million acres–almost 40 percent of the highly erodible cropland–had been reduced to below the soil loss tolerance level. This remarkable progress needs to be sustained through continuing assistance to producers as they update and revise conservation compliance plans. NRCS will provide technical and financial assistance to producers who have achieved their compliance goals and are interested in making further conservation improvements. For some producers, alternatives to crop production–such as intensive rotational grazing, timber production, and enrollment in CRP–may be better options for their farm operations and for the Nation's soil resource.

Performance Measures

- Healthy cropland supports a substantial part of our Nation's agricultural economy. Ways to measure that NRCS is contributing to the health of our Nation's cropland are: 1) to measure the decrease in the amount of cropland acreage that is eroding at unsustainable rates as determined by the soil loss tolerance (T) level for that land, and 2) to measure an increase in the cropland acreage that NRCS helps landowners place under conservation systems designed to improve soil quality.

  Baseline In 1992, 67.9 million acres of non-highly erodible cropland were eroding above the soil loss tolerance rate (T).

  Target By 2002, the acreage of non-highly erodible cropland eroding above T will be cut by one-third from 1992 levels.

  Baseline In 1992, 44.9 million acres of highly erodible cropland was eroding above 2T.

  Target By 2002, the acreage of highly erodible cropland eroding above 2T will be cut by one-third from 1992 levels.

  Baseline The Resource Assessment and Strategic Planning Division is leading the effort to develop an adequate baseline and tracking system.

  Target By 2002, 50 percent of U.S. cropland will be managed with conservation systems that enhance soil quality.

Objective 2.2

Healthy watersheds providing clean and abundant water supplies for people and the environment.

Water quality and quantity issues are closely linked. Actions that reduce water quantity can adversely affect water quality, just as poor water quality can reduce the amount of water available to support desired or beneficial uses. Water resource management is built on a foundation of effective soil conservation and management. But good soil conservation alone is not enough to ensure that adequate supplies of clean water are available to support people, communities, agriculture, and the environment.

Careful management of watersheds–the land that captures, stores, and supplies water to streams, lakes, rivers, reservoirs, and aquifers–is essential to ensure sufficient supplies of high-quality water.

Substantial progress has been made in preventing pollution and improving water quality. Land use and management practices exist that reduce the potential for runoff and erosion; increase the capacity to trap or degrade potential pollutants; improve the stability of stream banks and shorelines; and increase the amount of precipitation that is captured and stored for use in the future. Nevertheless, water resource management is certain to be a growing concern for agriculture and communities.

The 1994 National Water Quality Inventory, a biannual compilation of data from states and American Indian tribes, reported that about one-third of the water resources inventoried suffered from use impairment, and that agriculture was the leading cause of impairments. Competing demands for water among municipal, industrial, agricultural, and instream uses (e.g., recreation, endangered species habitat) increasingly press upon limited and seasonally variable water supplies. Groundwater overdrafting has been reported nationwide in states with irrigated land. While irrigators have reduced water application rates, the loss of sediments, salts, nutrients, and pesticides from irrigated fields cause water quality problems in some regions, particularly the West.

Time Frame for Completion

Conserving and enhancing watersheds, water supplies, and water quality is a continuing process challenged by changes in land use, market influences, and environmental conditions.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Promote conservation management and planning approaches that prevent water quality impairment: Agriculture has a high potential to contribute sediment, nutrients, pesticides, salts, and other potential pollutants to water bodies, impairing water quality in some watersheds. Yet, just as agriculture has potential to degrade water resources, it also has potential to improve water resources. NRCS will assist individuals and communities to prevent water quality and water supply problems by: maintaining a strong core conservation presence; developing national initiatives to address resource concerns with high potential to impair water quality or supply; and strengthening resource inventory and monitoring capacity to predict the effects of land use or management changes on water quality and water supply.
- Work with our partners to complete a comprehensive water resource needs assessment: Our ability to plan strategically to achieve water resource goals is seriously hampered by the lack of comprehensive information on water quality and supply problems. There is no single, comprehensive inventory of watersheds that outlines the scope and severity of water resource problems confronting landowners and communities. NRCS will work with partners at local, state, regional, and national levels to construct a better picture of the water resource challenges facing landowners, communities, agriculture, and conservationists.
- Provide coordinated assistance to watersheds in need of conservation: NRCS will address national water resource priorities by acting locally and will use a coordinated watershed approach, to deliver resource assessment, planning, technical, and financial assistance to high-priority watersheds. Priority watershed projects will focus on source water protection, helping communities meet Safe Drinking Water Act and Federal Water Pollution Control Act objectives, and contributing to the protection of nationally significant water resources such

as the Gulf of Mexico, Columbia River, Chesapeake Bay, Great Lakes, and Colorado River, among others. The watershed approach will integrate water supply and water quality concerns and will bring together all stakeholders to leverage their interests and resources and to set common goals and develop common strategies for water resource conservation and management.

Performance Measures

- Healthy watersheds are fundamental to supporting communities, individuals, and the environment and the economic activities dependent on these components. Ways to measure that NRCS is contributing to improving water resources are: 1) to measure the completion of watershed projects that address the water quality and conservation problems of communities and produce real benefits in water quality and supply, and 2) to measure the installation of conservation buffer strips that further protect watersheds and water supplies.

  Baseline Data are collected at the program level. The Conservation Operations Division is leading the effort to construct an adequate baseline and develop a reliable tracking system.

  Target By 2002, NRCS and our partners will be completing 100 priority watershed projects each year that meet the goals set by local communities for water supply, water quality, or flood protection.

  Baseline Data are collected at the program level. The Conservation Operations Division is leading the effort to construct an adequate baseline and develop a reliable tracking system.

  Target By 2002, we will have helped landowners and communities establish 2 million miles of buffer strips to protect watersheds and water supplies.

Objective 2.3

Healthy and productive grazing land sustaining U.S. agriculture and the environment.

Nonfederal, privately owned grazing land–pasture and rangeland–is found in every state and territory, but the kind, amount, productivity, use, products, and value of grazing land varies greatly from place to place. More than 1 million farms and ranches, over half the farms and ranches in the United States, have grazing land on which livestock production is the major use. Grazing land makes up almost 40 percent of all private land in the United States and provides important habitat–food, water, and cover–for wildlife. Most of the Nation's wildlife spend part or all of their lives on grazing land.

Grazing land also is an important watershed component. Vast amounts of precipitation fall on these lands each year. On well-managed grazing land, much of this water infiltrates into the soil and is used for plant growth, is stored in underground aquifers, or flows through the soil to replenish streams, riparian areas, wetlands, underground aquifers, and lakes. People use this water for agricultural, domestic, and industrial purposes. On poorly managed grazing land, however, precipitation runs off rapidly and soil moisture for grazing land plants is decreased, soil erosion is increased, and nutrients and sediment are washed into streams and lakes, damaging valuable habitat and increasing the cost of water storage and treatment.

Time Frame for Completion

Conserving and enhancing grazing land is a continuing process challenged by market forces that create landuse shifts, the state of conservation technology, and environmental conditions.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Promote conservation management and planning approaches that prevent grazing land damage and fully examine opportunities to diversify business operations: Proven, well-understood, and economically viable grazing management systems exist that can meet most of the conservation needs of grazing land. In many cases, technical assistance to help landowners and land managers develop and implement improved grazing management is all that is needed to solve resource problems, improve or maintain grazing land health, and take advantage of opportunities to diversify enterprises. NRCS will increase grazing management technical assistance available to landowners, strengthen inventory and assessment capabilities at the field level, and develop and implement grazing land health indicators for rangeland and pastureland for use in resource assessment and inventory, conservation planning, and performance measurement.
- Assist landowners and communities to implement economically and environmentally sound grazing land reclamation efforts: Reclamation is required when severe degradation has occurred, but due to cost it is practical only on grazing lands that produce large economic returns to the landowner, or if the public is willing to share the cost of reclamation. NRCS will identify areas where reclamation is needed to enhance the condition of public resources, and assist landowners in planning and implementing economically and environmentally sound grazing land reclamation practices.
- Help producers implement cooperative, regional approaches to grazing land conservation: Some grazing land management problems cannot be solved by individuals working alone. Preventing the advance of an invasive noxious weed, for example, requires the full participation and cooperation of local landowners. NRCS will assist landowners and local communities in learning to identify such threats to grazing land health, develop area-wide plans to address these problems, and strengthen resource inventory and assessment to support effective group action.

Performance Measures

- Healthy grazing land supports a substantial part of the Nation's agricultural economy and plays an enormous role in protecting environmental quality. Ways to measure that NRCS is contributing to improving grazing land quality are: 1) to measure increases in grazing land acreage that no longer shows sign of serious ecological or management problems, and 2) to measure increases in the rangeland acreage with streams where no serious streambank erosion is occurring.

  Baseline In 1992, 39 percent of U.S. rangeland showed no evidence of serious ecological or management problems.

  Target By 2002, 45 percent of U.S. rangeland will have no serious ecological or management problems.

  Baseline In 1992, 54 percent of U.S. permanent pastureland showed no evidence of serious ecological or management problems.

  Target By 2002, 60 percent of U.S. permanent pastureland will have no serious ecological or management problems.

Baseline In 1992, 59 percent of rangeland acreage with streams showed no evidence of serious streambank erosion.

Target By 2002, 65 percent of rangeland acreage with streams will have no serious streambank erosion taking place.

Objective 2.4

Healthy and productive wetlands sustaining watersheds and wildlife.

Wetlands are among the richest and most productive habitats on Earth, although they comprise a minor part of the landscape–only about 5 percent of the total land mass of the United States. Nonetheless, they provide disproportionate benefits, including:

- Natural pollution control by filtering out sediment and other pollutants.
- Natural flood control by storing precipitation and runoff.
- Recharge of groundwater.
- Critical habitat for fish and wildlife.

There are two broad ecological classes of wetlands–estuarine and palustrine. The estuarine system includes salt and brackish tidal marshes, mangrove swamps, and intertidal flats. Palustrine wetlands comprise the vast majority of wetlands, some 105 million acres, including inland marshes, bogs, swamps, and vernal pools. About 86 million palustrine wetland acres occur on private land, including forest land. Approximately one-eighth of these wetlands are farmed or are small, temporary or seasonal wetlands that are often associated with agriculture.

Wetlands on agricultural land include some of the most important wetland habitats in North America. Wetland losses due to agriculture in some regions have been so extensive that only a small fraction of the original wetlands remain today. Of the original 24 million acres of seasonally flooded bottomland hardwood forest, only 3 million acres remain today. In some highly agricultural states the effects are even more dramatic. Iowa has lost approximately 90 percent of its original wetlands, practically all to agriculture.

Time Frame for Completion

Conserving and restoring wetlands on agricultural land is an ongoing process challenged by market forces affecting landuse decisions and environmental conditions.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Provide coordinated assistance to areas in need of wetland conservation: Strategically located concentrations of wetlands and associated habitats are needed to support the most important economic and ecological values of wetlands, which may range from water storage and flood control or natural filter systems to wildlife habitat. Complexes of wetlands, for example, are needed to provide flood storage for rivers, such as the Missouri River, or to provide nesting, brood rearing, migratory, and wintering habitat for migratory waterfowl. NRCS will coordinate with its partners, other agencies, and groups to identify geographic areas with the greatest need and potential for wetland conservation; and identify opportunities to integrate wetland conservation with water quality, flood prevention, grazing land, and other conservation objectives at the national, state, and local level.
- Implement a training and outreach initiative to promote NRCS staff, partner, landowner, and community understanding of wetlands functions: Understanding of and appreciation for wetlands is essential to conservation of wetlands on

private land. A 1994 survey of NRCS district conservationists revealed a significant lack of information on and understanding of wetland functions and values. NRCS will accelerate training and outreach to staff to increase knowledge and appreciation of wetlands and help them better pass that information to partners, landowners, and communities; increase science-based resource information, wetlands data, and interpretive assistance to landowners, units of government, organizations, and other decision makers; and fully integrate economic and financial factors with ecological factors in targeting wetland conservation programs.

- Provide assistance to landowners and communities to restore, enhance, and protect wetlands on private land: New restoration and enhancement methods are available that make it easier to integrate wetland conservation into agricultural operations. Prompt incorporation of new wetland technology into agency programs is critical in order to maintain program credibility as well as increase field utility and provide high-quality services to producers. NRCS will develop, adapt, and disseminate science-based techniques for field application of wetland conservation technologies; identify farming and ranching systems that allow use of wetlands while maintaining wetland functions and values; and integrate farm bill programs with other governmental and nongovernmental programs to conserve wetlands.
- Streamline wetland delineation and regulations: NRCS is now the lead Federal agency for wetland delineation on agricultural land. Consistent and accurate wetland determination and delineation are essential to help landowners make better landuse management decisions. NRCS will ensure high-quality interpretation and application of wetland identification criteria, provide technical assistance and guidance to evaluate wetland conservation options, and develop and implement standard, scientifically based methods to quantify wetland functions to help determine mitigation needs and minimal effects.
- Conduct timely assessments of wetland status and trends: Up-to-date, accurate information on wetland gains and losses is essential to guide wetland conservation. NRCS will provide current wetland status and trend information, work with partners to develop a comprehensive monitoring system, and develop monitoring protocols to assess changes in wetland health.

Performance Measures

- Healthy wetlands provide benefits for water supply, quality, and management; and wildlife populations, among others. A way to measure that NRCS is contributing to the conservation of the Nation's wetlands resource is to measure a net increase in wetland functions on agricultural land.

  Baseline In 1992, 25.1 million acres of wetlands existed on agricultural land. The Resource Assessment and Strategic Planning Division is leading the effort to develop a wetlands loss/gain tracking system and to establish an adequate baseline.

  Target By 2000, we will have helped landowners and communities increase wetland functions on agricultural land.

Objective 2.5

High-quality habitat on private land supporting the Nation's wildlife heritage.

Agriculture has had a substantial impact on the distribution and abundance of fish and wildlife populations. But just as agriculture has been a significant factor in many wildlife declines, it also can be a major factor in restoring wildlife populations. At least 80 percent of our native threatened and endangered species depend on habitat on privately owned land for survival, primarily agricultural land. Soil and water conservation has been and will continue to be the foundation of NRCS assistance to landowners and communities. Achieving the targets for soil and water resources, grazing land, and wetlands will produce parallel improvements in fish and wildlife habitat as well.

The challenge to wildlife conservation in agricultural landscapes is that many practices sufficient to conserve soil or improve water quality are inadequate for creating, restoring, or maintaining habitat. Quality and quantity of habitat also are significant issues, as the needs of certain species are greater than others. Assisting landowners and communities increase habitat for species of concern, such as threatened and endangered species, can be promoted through the locally led process that brings the interests and resources of all interested parties to the table for habitat conservation. NRCS will pursue two primary strategies to contribute to wildlife conservation: 1) Integrate fish and wildlife habitat concerns into ongoing and new conservation initiatives, and 2) Build strong partnerships to increase wildlife conservation expertise and leverage wildlife conservation assistance to landowners and communities.

Time Frame for Completion

Conserving and enhancing wildlife habitat on privately owned land is a continuing process influenced largely by landuse decisions and market forces.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Integrate habitat concerns into soil and water conservation systems: The beneficial effect of traditional soil and water conservation systems on fish and wildlife habitat can be enhanced by incorporating habitat concerns into the design and management of those systems. NRCS will identify opportunities to build fish and wildlife habitat restoration conservation assistance into the conservation systems by integrating wildlife habitat assessments into conservation planning; concentrating NRCS technical assistance to improve wetlands and associated habitat, riparian areas, and grassland habitat; and increasing staff knowledge of habitat restoration.
- Build strong partnerships to increase wildlife conservation expertise and leverage wildlife conservation assistance to landowners and communities: Wildlife conservation demands skills that NRCS does not presently have, and that likely will never be part of NRCS's core expertise. NRCS will develop strong partnerships with governmental and nongovernmental organizations to ensure that landowners and communities have access to wildlife conservation assistance. Primary Federal partners include the Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Marine Fisheries Service; and NRCS will work to develop partnerships with state fish and wildlife agencies and nongovernmental organizations. Working through State Technical Committees, NRCS will bring together Federal, state, and local governmental and nongovernmental programs and resources to strengthen wildlife conservation on private land and leverage stakeholder interests and resources through the locally led process.

Performance Measures

- High-quality habitat on private land is essential to the conservation of our Nation's wild heritage. Ways to measure that NRCS is contributing to improving the extent and quality of this habitat are: 1) to measure an increase in native grassland acreage, which is an essential habitat type for many species of current concern, and 2) to measure an increase in restored riparian habitat that provides the biological corridors and habitat richness critical to the survival of much of America's wildlife.

  Baseline As of the 12th CRP sign-up, 8.5 million acres have been converted to native grassland and prairie in the Midwest and Great Plains. The Conservation Operations Division is leading the effort to construct an improved baseline and design a reliable tracking system.

  Target By 2002, 20 million acres of cropland or pastureland will be con verted to native grassland vegetation in the Midwest and the Great Plains.

  Baseline As of the 13th CRP sign-up, 86.8 thousand acres have been placed in filter strips or riparian buffers. The Conservation Operations Division is leading the effort to construct an improved baseline and design a reliable tracking system.

  Target By 2002, riparian habitat along 600 miles of rivers, streams, lakes, or wetlands will be restored.

Management Initiatives

Some program objectives described in this strategic plan are supported by management initiatives, such as training, investment in information and communication technologies, and procedure streamlining. These inputs are embedded in strategies and are discussed only with regard to their contribution to the associated task and strategic objective. These management initiatives ultimately support each of NRCS's goals and strategic objectives, but relate most directly to Goal 1–Individuals and their neighbors working together as effective and willing stewards of the natural resources on their property and in their communities. In addition, these initiatives also support the Department Management Initiatives of ensuring that customers and employees are treated fairly and equitably with dignity and respect, improving customer service, and creating a unified system of information technology management. Specific management initiatives that have been incorporated in this plan include:

- Increase training of field staff and partners — NRCS's strength is its employees, and its success depends primarily upon their skills, expertise, and knowledge. Technical excellence is the foundation of NRCS. Maintaining technical excellence is growing more difficult as the pace of technological change increases, and as the conservation agenda expands. Similarly, new skills will be needed to make the most effective use of the new information technology environment that will characterize the workplace of the future.
- Increase assistance delivery to socially disadvantaged and minority customers—Enhancing delivery to under-served and nontraditional customers will require an investment in new methods of organizing and delivering conservation information, training of employees, and developing methods to survey these new customers and identify their conservation needs.
- Increasing efficiency—NRCS will strive to increase efficiency by streamlining processes; targeting priority areas; and enhancing the quality, accessibility, and speed with which we provide natural resource data, assessment, and analyses to our customers. NRCS recognizes that it cannot provide all the needed conservation

expertise alone. Similarly, NRCS's niche will, and should, vary from region to region and state to state. The agency will need to strengthen its partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations and industry to ensure that the complete range of conservation expertise is available to landowners, users, and managers who make natural resource decisions. Integrating USDA programs with those of other Federal, state, local, and nongovernmental programs and industry initiatives will be a key to conservation success.

- Strengthen and expand natural resource assessment capability — Improving natural resource assessment capability will require an investment in new technology, human resources, and data sharing. NRCS will work closely with FS, FSA, NASS, ERS, ARS, NOAA, BLM, EPA, USGS, FWS, and others in data collection and assessment activities to develop common protocol and terminology and to merge agency efforts where possible in order to enhance the usability and deliverability of natural resource data and information. NRCS also must work to stay at the forefront of conservation technologies. NRCS will focus its scientific and technical development to ensure excellence in five core conservation sciences and technologies, including: Soil and natural resource inventory and assessment, Soil conservation and management, Water conservation and management, Grazing land management, and Bioengineering (use of plant materials for engineering practices).
- Strengthen the agency's technical service delivery through science-based, state-of-the-art technology — NRCS is implementing a planned approach to support the increased use of networked communications, data sharing and exchange, and geospatial processing tools by field staff. The "field-level" Information Technology environment envisioned by the Futures Directions Taskforce will require new and more abundant skills in telecommunications and data management and administration. To support increased use of remote data and information, NRCS needs to substantially improve its capacity to generate and transfer information throughout the agency and to its customers; enhance the capacity of field offices to use geographic information systems to support conservation planning and technical assistance; and provide our staff and our customers easy access to soil and natural resource information via the Internet and other emerging information systems. Currently, three percent of all NRCS offices are fully networked. By the end of 1998, a fully networked system for communication and data transfer will be in place in all NRCS locations.
- Increase accessibility — Through the Field Service Center concept, NRCS, district, and state conservation staff are co-located in some 2,500 centers across the Nation to increase efficiency by fostering coordination among partners and facilitating customer access to information and assistance.
- Ensure customers and employees are treated fairly and equitably — Our managers at all levels will be held accountable for the delivery of services to our customers on a non-discriminatory basis. We will respect the dignity and worth of every person we serve; deal with each of them honestly and fairly; listen to their views and respond with advice that is tailored to their needs and is technically accurate; and measure our efforts against the highest standards. Our managers will also be held accountable for civil rights and workforce diversity within NRCS. NRCS employees are its strength. Success in achieving the Agency's mission depends on employee skill, expertise, and knowledge. We are committed to providing all employees with a work environment where they are respected, valued, and supported.

To ensure that our programs are delivered efficiently and effectively through our field delivery system and to take advantage of opportunities for streamlining, NRCS will participate with the Offices of the Assistant Secretary for Administration and the Chief Information Officer as we implement the Administrative Convergence initiative. This initiative will consolidate the administrative resources and functions (financial management, human resources management, property and contracting, civil rights, and information resources management) both nationally and at the state level for the Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services and Rural Development mission areas and for all levels of NRCS.

Linkage of Goals to Annual Performance Plan

Performance measurement and planning for natural resource conservation involve:

- Setting annual goals for implementing the Strategies called for in the strategic plan;
- Tracking each year's progress in implementing those Strategies;
- Estimating each year's contribution toward achieving performance targets and strategic objectives;
- Conducting periodic surveys, inventories, and assessments to measure progress toward performance targets and strategic objectives; and
- Conducting periodic evaluations of the performance of conservation programs.

Goal 1, Individuals and their Neighbors Working Together as Effective and Willing Stewards of the Natural Resources on their Property and in their Communities, and Goal 2, Healthy and Productive Land that Sustains Food and Fiber Production, Sustains Functioning Watersheds and Natural Systems, Enhances the Environment, and Improves Urban and Rural Landscapes are linked to the following NRCS budget program activities: America's Private Land Conservation, Soil Survey, Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting, Plant Materials, Watershed Planning and Surveys, Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations, Resources Conservation & Development, Forestry Incentives Program, Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers & Ranchers, Wetlands Reserve Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Farmland Protection Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, and Conservation Farm Option. The Goals are also linked to the following Farm Service Agency's budget program activities, Conservation Reserve Program, Flood Risk Reduction Program, Agriculture Market Transition Act Contracts, and Emergency Conservation Program.

Annual Performance Plans and Reports

The annual performance plan provides the link to general goals, strategic objectives, performance targets, and strategies in the strategic plan, and outlines annual performance goals and additional supporting tasks that are needed to implement agency strategies and achieve agency performance targets. The annual performance plans and reports serve as the basic management tools to direct the use of resources to implement strategies and identify programs to be used to achieve general goals, strategic objectives, and performance targets. Plans also include estimated staff years and program costs required to achieve annual performance goals.

The majority of the multi-year performance targets for natural resources outlined in this strategic plan establish acre goals for specific improvements in resource condition. For each objective and target, annual performance goals and measures have been defined and are described in the Annual Performance Plan. Annual performance measures and goals are based on the overall change needed to achieve the performance

target described in the strategic plan. For example, Goal 2, Objective 1–Healthy and productive cropland identifies 2002 performance targets of reducing by one-third the amount of cropland acreage that is eroding at unsustainable rates as compared to 1992 levels. Data from NRCS' 1992 National Resources Inventory (NRI) were used to determine the baseline acreage fitting this criterion in 1992, and the 2002 performance target in acres was developed from this baseline.

Annual performance measures rely on measures of "conservation on the land" achieved with direct technical assistance from NRCS and our partners. These measures are identified based on the systems and practices for which NRCS has developed standards and specifications that are documented in the field office technical guides. To measure progress toward reducing the amount of cropland eroding at unsustainable rates, NRCS will track the number of cropland acres protected against excessive erosion. *Annual performance goals* identify the number of acres to be so treated for each year up to 2002. In this way annual performance measures and goals are identified for each of the eight NRCS Strategic Objectives.

This strategic plan also represents an integration of agency programs, requiring establishment of new tracking systems and methods of evaluating progress across social, cultural, economic, and natural resource systems. Baseline data and tracking systems are under development for certain performance targets. In the interim, NRCS will identify measurable surrogate performance outputs that provide the closest approximation of NRCS progress toward those objectives where baselines and tracking systems are under development. Once the intended baseline data and tracking systems are available, annual performance plans will reflect this new information and adjust performance measures and goals as necessary.

Measuring Progress Toward Achieving General Goals

Achieving annual performance goals, as determined from annual performance reports, will be the basic measure of accountability at all levels of the organization. Program managers will be responsible for ensuring that funds are used in accordance with the purpose and intent of Congress.

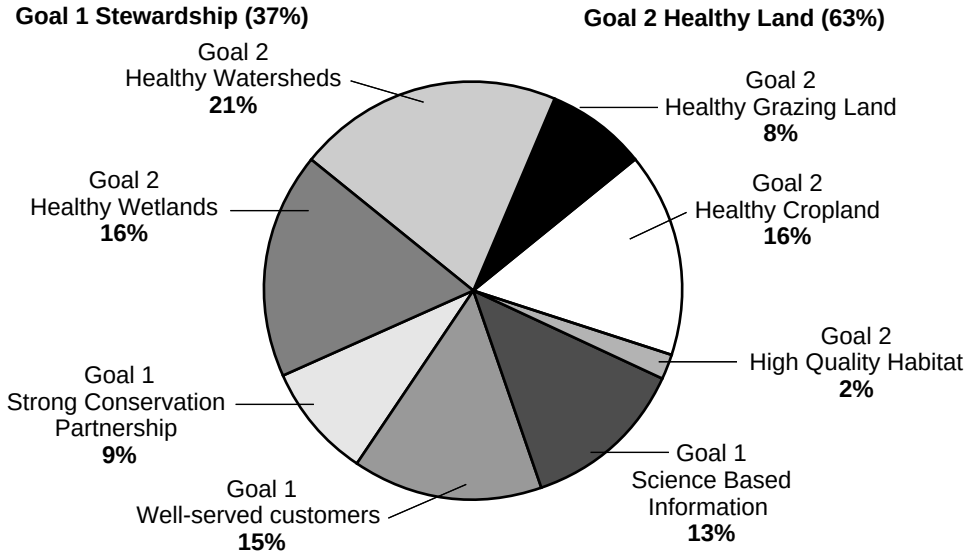
The performance targets established for each strategic objective are measurable goals that will indicate progress toward achieving the strategic objectives, and general goals in the strategic plan. Achieving those performance targets is the most direct indication that progress is being made by NRCS and its partners. NRCS will use two primary means of tracking progress:

- Annual performance indicators, set forth in annual performance reports, will be used as input to models or other analytical tools to make annual estimates of progress, which in turn will be used to revise subsequent annual performance plans. Data sources for determining achievement of annual goals include data recorded in case files in USDA Service Centers and recorded in the NRCS Field Office Computing System (FOCS), which will be aggregated at the national level by the NRCS National Information Management System (NIMS).
- Data collection and analyses will be conducted periodically to track changes in the status, condition, and trends in conservation and natural resources. These ongoing assessments will estimate longer term changes in stewardship and on the land. The results of these assessments will be compared to performance targets as a broad measure of progress toward general goals. The 1997 NRI now underway will provide an updated baseline and measures of achievement of annual goals and an indication of progress toward the 2002 targets. Another inventory in 2002 will enable NRCS to make a reliable evaluation as to whether performance targets have been achieved.

Resources Needed

Strategic objectives and performance targets in this plan were established based on two assumptions: 1) that resources available to NRCS from FY 1998 through FY 2002 will be at the level outlined in the FY 1998 Department budget estimate and adjusted for pay cost and inflation, and 2) that NRCS and partners will be successful in doubling other Federal, state, local, and nongovernmental funds and other contributions to conservation. NRCS will need to improve its technical expertise and capability to achieve the outcomes outlined in this plan. Existing resources will need to be redirected and will result in a de-emphasis of some current activities, but substantial new investments (beyond those assumed in preparation of this plan) will be needed in training, information technology, and conservation technology to support conservation technical assistance to landowners and communities.

Percentage of Resources Allocated to Each NRCS Objective



Goal 1 objectives provide the foundation for accomplishing Goal 2 objectives

Program Evaluation

Periodic evaluation of the implementation and accomplishments of individual conservation programs administered by NRCS is a critical element of our overall performance measurement system. These evaluations help NRCS determine the overall contribution to conservation of our Nation's natural resources resulting from agency activities. Programs are evaluated to estimate the benefits achieved, cost effectiveness, and the extent to which customer needs are met and congressional intent is achieved. More broadly, programs are evaluated to assess how effectively each program is contributing to achieving the desired outcomes.

The Great Plains Conservation Program, the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program, the Conservation Technical Assistance Program, and the Water Quality Program all have been evaluated in the past decade. These evaluations were instrumental in developing and refining this strategic plan, particularly for strategic objectives and strategies related to erosion control, water quality and supply, and grazing land health. National evaluations initiated in FY 1997 include: Emergency Watershed Protection Program; Soil Survey Program; Conservation Planning; American Indian/Alaska Native Program Delivery; Implementation of the

Conservation Reserve Program, 14th and 15th sign-ups; and Implementation of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program in FY 1997. Evaluations recommended for initiation in 1998 include: Technology Delivery at the Field Office; Easement Management and Enforcement; Wetlands Conservation Provisions: Implementation of the Policy on Mitigation and Minimal Effect Determinations; and Wetland Restoration in the Wetlands Reserve Program.

Existing program tracking systems provide annual progress reports to measure program efficiency and contribution toward relevant strategic objectives. Findings of these periodic and annual evaluations are used to refine agency strategic objectives and strategies and guide agency strategic planning.

Role of External Entities

This plan was prepared by NRCS employees. No contractors were involved in activities directly related to preparation of reports. Contractors, working through cooperative agreements, have assisted in the analysis of data in support of this plan.

NRCS reached out to our partners and the broader community to receive input in preparing this plan. These activities included:

- Strategic planning and outreach in each of the six NRCS regions to identify natural resource concerns, strategic objectives, and performance goals.
- The Chief's reinvention forums that solicited input from 18,000 customers, partners, and employees across the country.
- A telephone survey conducted at the request of NRCS by the Gallup polling organization to assess public opinion regarding natural resource conservation and the appropriate role for NRCS.
- A customer satisfaction survey, as part of the Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) evaluation, was distributed to 6,000 statistically selected customers across the country.
- A series of forums in major agricultural regions and major urban centers, sponsored jointly by NRCS and the Soil and Water Conservation Society, to gather opinions about conservation needs and policies.
- NRCS evaluation of its CTA Program to assist in developing strategies, goals, and performance measures.
- Wide distribution of the strategic plan drafts for comment by agency staff and partners.
- Consultation with congressional committee staff and General Accounting Office and Congressional Research Service reviews of agency strategic plans.